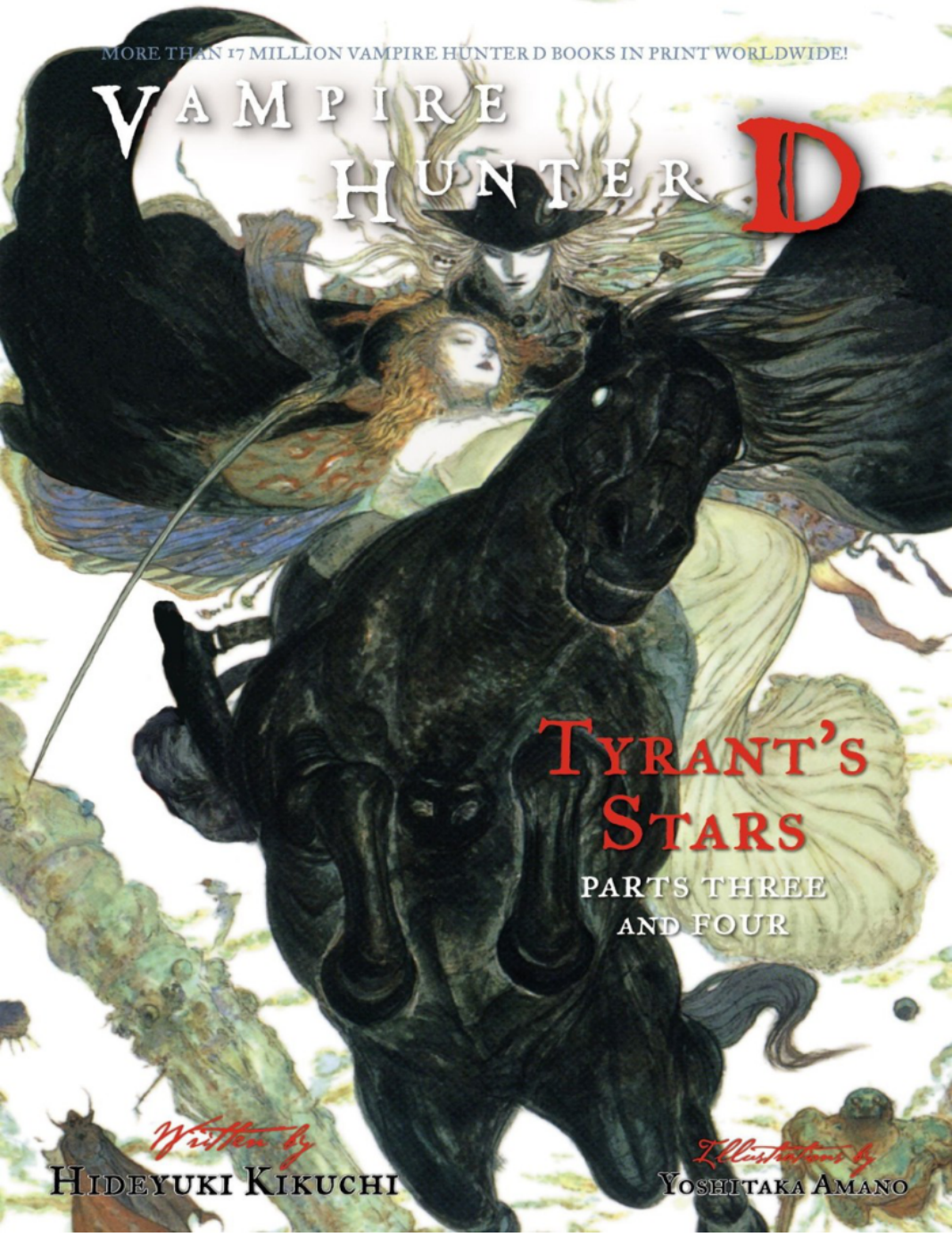
MORE THAN 17 MILLION VAMPIRE HUNTER D BOOKS IN PRINT WORLDWIDE!

VAMPIRE HUNTER D



TYRANT'S STARS

PARTS THREE AND FOUR

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
YOSHITAKA AMANO

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

Other Vampire Hunter D books published by
Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing

vol. 1: Vampire Hunter D
vol. 2: Raiser of Gales
vol. 3: Demon Deathchase
vol. 4: Tale of the Dead Town
vol. 5: The Stuff of Dreams
vol. 6: Pilgrimage of the Sacred and the Profane
vol. 7: Mysterious Journey to the North Sea part one
vol. 8: Mysterious Journey to the North Sea part two
vol. 9: The Rose Princess
vol. 10: Dark Nocturne
vol. 11: Pale Fallen Angel parts one and two
vol. 12: Pale Fallen Angel parts three and four
vol. 13: Twin-Shadowed Knight parts one and two
vol. 14: Dark Road parts one and two
vol. 15: Dark Road part three
vol. 16: Tyrant's Stars parts one and two

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 17

TYRANT'S STARS

PARTS THREE AND FOUR

Written by

HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by

YOSHITAKA AMANO

English translation by

KEVIN LEAHY

Dark Horse Books®
Milwaukie

Digital Manga Publishing
Los Angeles

VAMPIRE HUNTER D VOLUME 17: TYRANT'S STARS PARTS THREE AND FOUR
© Hideyuki Kikuchi 2011. Originally published in Japan in 2000 by ASAHI SONORAMA Co.
English translation copyright © 2011 by Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the express written permission of the copyright holders. Names, characters, places, and incidents featured in this publication either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events, institutions, or locales, without satiric intent, is coincidental. Dark Horse Books® and the Dark Horse logo are registered trademarks of Dark Horse Comics, Inc. All rights reserved.

Cover art by Yoshitaka Amano
English translation by Kevin Leahy
Book design by Krystal Hennes

Published by
Dark Horse Books
A division of Dark Horse Comics, Inc.
10956 SE Main Street
Milwaukie, OR 97222
DarkHorse.com

Digital Manga Publishing
1487 West 178th Street, Suite 300
Gardena, CA 90248
DMPBooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kikuchi, Hideyuki, 1949-
[D--Bokun no hoshi. English]
Tyrant's stars. Parts three and four / written by Hideyuki Kikuchi ; illustrated by Yoshitaka Amano ; English translation by Kevin Leahy. -- 1st Dark Horse books ed.
p. cm. -- (Vampire Hunter D ; v. 17)
ISBN-13: 978-1-59582-820-0
ISBN-10: 1-59582-820-6
I. Amano, Yoshitaka. II. Leahy, Kevin. III. Title.
PL832.I37D23613 2011
895.6'36--dc22
2011013520

First Dark Horse Books edition: October 2011
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed at Lake Book Manufacturing, Inc., Melrose Park, IL, U.S.A.

Tyrant's Stars

PART THREE

THE OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER 1

I

It was quiet.

The fighting outside didn't reach the interior of the fortress at all. The Sacred Ancestor's technology had become a barrier that repelled every last one of the enemy's attacks. Seen from a distance, the fortress must've appeared to be wrapped in a ball of blue light, due to the ceaseless bombardment of lithium atom rounds and proton missiles. The fortress's antiaircraft weapons were shooting down these inbound birds of death one after another, while laser and particle cannons seared enemy troops in rapid succession. Anyone could see the soundness of the fortress hadn't diminished an iota.

The door on the elevator to the operations center opened and a dashing man in black appeared. The androids halted for a moment as they focused their electronic eyes on him. He was so exquisite, even their electronic brains were briefly left inoperative.

Glancing around the operations center, which seemed shrouded in a bluish twilight, D asked, "Where's the count?"

"He's not here," one of the androids replied. "It isn't in his nature to watch the fighting from afar. So he said he was going to join the action."

"Do you know his location?" D asked.

A vast diagram in glowing lines appeared in the space before him: schematics of the fortress. A single red point gleamed.

"He's in the second armory," the android told the Hunter.

His fighting pose alone made his strength evident.

Taking a glance at Seurat's figure-eight stance, the count smiled and said, "Oh, you're good."

It was a warrior's nature to burn with a longing for battle when he encountered a formidable opponent. Going from a middle position to a low one, Braujou lowered the head of his spear. It was an invitation.

Seurat accepted it. Taking a step forward, he swung his sword at the right side of the count's neck with all his might.

I'm faster, the count thought.

His spear was ready to deflect the edge of his foe's blade—but it met only air. Seurat's face was so close their noses were nearly touching. The assassin's countenance was devoid of character, like a machine with eyes and a nose.

Steel bit into the nape of his neck. It ripped through the count's skin and innards like they were water, only stopping when it hit his

spine.

"Wish I could let that heal," Seurat said, oddly enough, as he pulled his longsword back out.

Before the count fell, his foe pierced him through the heart.

The enemy assault seemed endless. A fresh volley of missiles exploded against the barrier, their light sliding across it like blue ripples.

"A hole has been made in sector three of the barrier!"

"Energy patch complete. Repairs took six nanoseconds. It's believed the aerial projectile was a wormhole."

Turning his back on the mechanical voice's softly spoken account, D exited the operations center. Taking the electromagnetic elevator both vertically and horizontally, he headed toward the infirmary, where Sue was.

The elevator wasn't a box, but rather a condensed, subdimensional version of the electromagnetic waves that ran through the center of an electromagnetic coil. Ignoring the law of inertia in instantaneous movements horizontally and vertically, the person inside didn't feel any kind of shock at all. The door was merely an elliptical opening.

Without warning, D ordered, "Take me back to the floor we just passed."

His destination was verbally relayed to the mother computer.

"Understood."

As it gave this reply, an opening appeared in the center of the greenish glow.

A savage lust for killing blustered in. Anyone but D would've covered his face and curled into a ball.

When D stepped out, he saw a gigantic black figure that might've been mistaken for the count standing about thirty feet down the hall. At his feet lay the actual count.

The gigantic figure noticed D, too. Not bothering to sheathe the longsword he carried, he asked, "You're D, aren't you?"

Perhaps he didn't expect an answer, because he immediately continued, "I'm . . . Seurat. One of Valcua's seven. I just slew *this* one."

He turned his eyes to the count, who lay at his feet, and then returned them to D.

D saw the giant's right hand move to bat down all three of the wooden needles the Hunter had hurled.

"Just what I'd expect . . . from D," Seurat said, the young man in black reflected in his narrow eyes. "No mercy for his foes . . . is what I'd heard . . . But to take it to such a level . . . It makes me . . . burn for battle now."

A cracking sound came from his right hand as he adjusted his grip

on the hilt of his sword. He still didn't understand D.

While he was adjusting, D kicked off the floor, and by the time Seurat reflexively leaped back, raising his sword, the Hunter was above him, bringing his sword down fast—and splitting the giant's head open to the bridge of his nose. D twisted his body in midair to avoid a lightning-fast thrust, something only the Hunter could do.

As he landed, another slash came at his head. With only the tips of his toes making contact with the floor, D made a bound to the right as he hurled a rough wooden needle. Aimed right between Seurat's eyes, the needle disappeared the very instant it seemed to pierce the giant—missing him, just as D's slash of a second earlier had.

Seurat charged forward, his sword splitting D's left shoulder open. Bright blood went flying. It seemed to possess a will of its own as it slapped against the face of the still-pouncing Seurat, blinding him.

A black cyclone zipped to the chest of the stock-still assassin, sinking into him. The Hunter's blade ran through his heart. At least, that was the intent . . . but the giant leaped back beyond the weapon's tip, and the elevator to his rear opened. The blade of the sword disappeared.

As he wiped away the blood that covered his eyes, Seurat started to leap for the elevator, but then he stopped dead in his tracks. The huge figure who'd stepped through it blocked his way. Even on realizing that it was Count Braujou, with long spear in hand, Seurat didn't look surprised.

"The one I destroyed was a well-made android. Are *you* the original?"

"Rest assured," the count replied, smiling ferociously. "Though its innards might look just like mine, it won't turn to dust when it's destroyed. But you'll be the one who falls now."

Though he made a beautiful bound to avoid a horizontal swipe of the long spear, Seurat still found himself in an unprecedented predicament. Behind him an amazingly eerie aura closed in—D.

"D, this fellow wounded you and remains unharmed. What is he?" the Nobleman inquired, but perhaps he realized the Hunter might not reply, for he continued, "Are you one of Valcua's seven?"

"My name is Seurat," the giant replied.

"How polite of you to say so. And because you've made such a favorable impression on me, I'll now send you to your reward!"

As the Nobleman took a fighting stance with his long spear, Seurat was the focus of a deadly determination. Against D and Count Braujou, even this fiend—who'd used a bizarre power to keep the android count from landing a single blow and made D's blade disappear—seemed unlikely to escape unscathed. Nor were these the kind of men who'd be foolish enough to take turns fighting him one

on one. Still, Seurat's face was free of emotion as he took a figure-eight stance with his longsword.

"Well," the count said, and then the air changed.

It felt like someone who had no place in this world had just appeared.

"But that's . . ." the count began, his words sounding like a death rattle.

There was an incredible being there now. The overwhelming presence seemed to wrap around the count's bones and crush them, leaving him reeling. The air he inhaled in a desperate breath burned in his chest like acid.

At the same time, a tone that was cool and unspeakably soft yet equally powerful said, "So, you've come, Valcua?"

"We meet again, eh?" came the reply, in a voice that was quiet but still had the angry ring of thunder to it. "I gave you a warning before you entered the village of Marthias. Do you remember?"

There was no reply. D merely stared at a single point in space.

"Good enough. You're just a small fry, but an *interesting* small fry. I believe I'll grant you an audience. Right now, I'm in the fortress's reactor. Get here within a minute's time. If you don't, the fortress will be reduced to a fireball before another minute has passed. Braujou, I leave your fate in that man's hands."

"There's nothing I'd like better," the count said in a tone brimming with confidence. On hearing D's voice, he'd been freed from the spell of the Ultimate Noble.

The air eddied. Valcua's presence had departed. There was no sign of Seurat, either.

Looking at D, the count heaved a sigh. "I'll be a laughingstock till the end of my days, but may I ask you to do this?"

Before turning around, D gave a faint nod.

Watching the figure in black as he was swallowed by the elevator, the count let out another moan.

"Seurat, was it? It looks like I'll have to analyze his power."

The Nobleman's nerves were far from calm.

Who was that man, and who was the overpowering "Ultimate Noble" who wouldn't show himself?

Before a huge door, D halted. On the other side of the fifteen-foot-thick entry of ultradense steel, the reactor that gave life to the fortress burned with the intense energy released when protons came into contact with antiprotons.

"I'm inside. Thirty seconds left—you don't have much time. I feel it only fair to warn you that anyone whose DNA hasn't been encoded into the Sacred Ancestor's technology won't even be able to touch the

door. Keep that in mind as you make your attempt."

Already the computer had drawn a bead on D with a dimensional-vortex cannon.

D stepped forward.

"Ready to die?" Valcua's voice sneered.

Purple light fell from the ceiling straight down on D. The instant D's form rose from it the light faded, becoming a single beam that penetrated the center of the door. Slowly it opened down the middle, allowing D to enter.

"Oh, my—not bad for a small fry!" Valcua said, his voice containing relatively little surprise.

This in itself was worthy of admiration. A person whose DNA was encoded into the Sacred Ancestor's technology—that was tantamount to saying someone came from the Sacred Ancestor's bloodline. But Valcua wasn't shocked by this. And he himself had made it inside.

"But you're three seconds late. The reactor will collapse in fifty-seven seconds, and neither Braujou nor Miranda can press the switch to stop it. Only the Sacred Ancestor could stop a meltdown."

As D turned without a moment's pause toward the reactor, he heard a sweet female voice say, "Collapse in fifty-one seconds. Fifty seconds . . ."

II

Who had chosen that lovely female voice to inform them of impending death and destruction? Despite the pronouncements by the angel of death, D didn't seem afraid as he walked with great strides to the front of the reactor.

"What happened to your left hand?" Valcua's voice inquired mockingly. He'd said he was inside the reactor, but there was no sign of him.

Though it was regulated from a control room, there were also controls inside the reactor itself for use in an emergency. The reason D chose the latter was simple: the reactor was closer.

"When those three who didn't know their place planned this citadel to escape my wrath, they needed the aid of the Sacred Ancestor to design this reactor. First came the reactor, and then the fortress was constructed around it. It is, quite literally, the source of life here. D, can you prevent it from becoming the cause of death?"

As the Ultimate Noble posed his question, D didn't appear to look for him, but rather stood directly before the reactor.

The woman's voice counted out forty-six seconds.

At that moment, numerous silvery grains rose up on all sides of D. In the blink of an eye, they covered D's body and then disappeared in

another blink. They had been drawn into D's flesh.

At almost the same time, a green object appeared before D's eyes. Although the slim and graceful woman's hand was glowing green, it seemed somehow pale and white.

"Dear me," Valcua exclaimed, and this time he couldn't hide the hint of admiration in his voice.

D took hold of it with his right hand.

The female voice counted off, "Two seconds. One second."

Nothing changed, except for the female voice ceasing its count. The fires of hell that only those of the Sacred Ancestor's bloodline could control had been splendidly kept in check.

Looking up toward the ceiling as if nothing had transpired, D said, "Come out."

It wasn't a challenge. It was a command. A mere Hunter was ordering the Ultimate Noble to show himself.

In a tone that didn't hide his surprise, Valcua said, "So, you have the blood of the Sacred Ancestor in you?"

However, he immediately retracted his statement, saying with absolute arrogance, "No, a drudge like you couldn't be one of his descendants. I don't know what kind of device you might have or where you might've acquired it, but this farce has gone on long enough. Die!"

D blocked with his sword the streak of light that plummeted straight down at him. The sparks burned D's shadow onto the floor. Bounding to either side without a sound, the pair switched places, a fierce will to kill binding them together.

D saw the Ultimate Noble for the first time. Quite similar to the Hunter in terms of height and build, Valcua wore a golden cape. Given the hard, gleaming flecks that covered its surface, the garment seemed to be woven from some sort of metallic fiber. Beneath the cape, his torso and limbs were wrapped in lumpy pieces of bluish-green armor. His weapon was the golden light he gripped with his right hand. It wasn't metal, but rather seemed to be an ionlike substance that had undergone additional chemical treatment.

Not bothering to change stance, Valcua called out, "D!"

His voice emerged from a screen of gold. His forelocks hung down to his chin, concealing his eyes, nose, and mouth, while the rest of his hair reached his waist.

"Nicely blocked. I imagine that is the proper response. Who are you, sir?"

D's toes inched forward.

"My goodness! You send a chill down my spine—me, the great Valcua!—and make my blood run cold. Who knew there was such a man in the world besides *him* and myself? It would be a shame to kill

you. D, will you not join forces with me? Of course, in order to do that, the traitor and the two children would need to be dealt with first. Oh!"

Valcua raised his right hand. His sword of light sent a stream of gleaming particles at D, and the Hunter held his blade up straight to parry them. The light was slashed down the middle.

There was no change at all to the sword D held upright, and from his present position he leaped over Valcua. There was a clang, and sparks went flying. The blade of D's sword had been blocked over Valcua's head.

Roughly three feet in diameter, his perfectly circular shield had the same golden glow as the Ultimate Noble's sword of light. It hadn't been concealed before—Valcua must've had the power to create it from thin air.

Light challenged light. There was no hesitation in D's attack. Striking with breathless speed, D's sword was dodged, parried, and countered with glowing thrusts as Valcua backed away.

As D parried one of these attacks, there came a momentary opening. The shield pushed forward. As if driven by the force of the wind, D leaped back. The glowing blade pursued him. When D deflected it, it broke off at an angle, flying up to sink into the reactor's outer walls.

Before D had even landed, a red light winked on in the room.

"Damage extends to the third layer of shielding," a mechanical voice informed them. "Repair systems operational. Level-five damage verified. Level-five damage verified."

"Repairs are urgently needed. Repairs are urgently needed."

"It looks as if not even the Sacred Ancestor's technology could guard against the Sacred Ancestor's destructive power," Valcua said, his golden face upturned a little. There was bitterness in his voice. "As this destruction wasn't at my bidding, there's nothing I can do about it. I suppose I should leave before I'm caught up in the consequences. D, won't you come with me?"

Even after their deadly battle, did Valcua still intend to win D over?

The outlines of his form became indistinct as he transformed into a gaseous mass that resembled gold and black oil paints swirled together. Once the air had assimilated it, D sheathed his sword and started walking toward the door.

"At present, repairs are under way. Repairs are under way. The damage has not been contained. The damage has not been contained."

"A dimensional fusing is required. Development of the technology is under way."

The stern voices of the machines came from behind the Hunter.

They sounded frantic.

D was just coming out the door when he met a familiar face. Moving down the hall was his charred left hand.

"You're late," D said.

"What are you talking about? I finally silenced Sigma. Just look at the shape I'm in!"

"Did you destroy Sigma?"

"I can't say that for sure," it replied, its tone dropping. "At the very least, I left 'im so he won't be able to ever send another terminal at us. But as for whether or not his main form has been shut down—"

"The reactor's been damaged," D said.

"*What?*"

“The damage was done by one of the Sacred Ancestor’s weapons. I need your help.”

“You intend to get even more work out of me? You’re absolutely heartless . . . like some kind of beautiful demon.”

Even as it cursed him, it made mention of his beauty. D had that effect on everyone.

Leaving his left hand, D walked toward the elevator. Seen from behind, he was an exquisite sight, befitting the stillness in the hall.

Even now, inside and out, a horrible battle to the death that burned everything down to the very atoms was growing even more intense. Within the fortress, klaxons had resounded for several minutes. The security computers that hadn’t noticed Valcua’s entry had awakened from the sleeplike spell that had been over them during D’s pitched battle.

Even in the fortress’s infirmary, security had its eyes and swords ready to strike down any intruders. Although this facility was intended in part for the trio of Nobles who’d constructed the fortress, there were also a number of sickrooms for any humans who served them. Behind a door protected by android sentries were Sue and Matthew.

Less than two minutes after D’s fierce battle with Valcua, another android was walking past the infirmary. Once it came to the door, it suddenly turned in that direction and headed straight for the children’s room.

“Halt,” the sentries said, raising the particle cannons mounted on their arms, but that did nothing to stop its advance. Blue and white lights focused on the intruder, becoming blinding, cracked streaks that clung to every inch of it. The android shuddered, tumbling forward before the memory banks of its control unit were destroyed. Still lying as it had fallen, it reached out with its right hand and touched the foot of the sentry in front of it.

A heartbeat later, the android it touched turned toward another sentry and subjected it to the same attack. Ignoring its compatriot as it too fell forward, the sentry drew a bead on the circuits for accessing the sickroom with its particle cannon.

Matthew was gazing at the face of the slumbering Sue. Ever since he’d been brought back by the same android count that had led him into a trap before returning to its senses, Sue had been asleep. He’d heard she’d been possessed by part of something sent to defeat D. Apparently she’d lost consciousness when that thing left her. As the boy intently watched her sleeping face, something dangerous stirred in his heart.

Ever since Sue was a child, he’d found her face to be endearing as

she slumbered, and he would wait until she fell asleep before watching her for hours solely by the light of the moon. Even after they got separate bedrooms, he never tired of sneaking in under cover of night to gaze at her. In those days, they were still on the farm, and their mother was with them. Now that he was free of the bonds of that mundane existence, was the face of his soundly sleeping sister so lovely it stirred desire in him?

When he'd learned that his sister had fallen for a man, it bothered Matthew so much it nearly drove him crazy. And when Count Braujou pointed out that the man in question was D, the boy really did lose his mind. He'd attacked Sue, and as a result he'd only driven her further away. What little remained of his reason scolded him, telling him that her reaction was only natural, but now that the two of them were alone again, he was finding it hard to restrain the manly urges rising inside him.

Grabbing Sue's blanket, he pulled it down to her belly. She was wearing pajamas. Matthew's face looked even stranger than Sue's had when she was possessed.

Unbuttoning her pajamas, he opened the front of them. Sue didn't move a muscle, which only emboldened Matthew. The flesh beneath the fabric revealed a pair of sizable swells that seemed fitting for someone her age, if not somewhat large given her fragile appearance.

Matthew's Adam's apple bobbed madly. Bringing his face closer to the pale-pink tip of her breast, he took a breath as if he could stand it no longer, and then took his sister's nipple in his mouth. Sue's body twitched a little. After lightly sucking on her breast, Matthew directed his obsession to her lovely mouth. As her rosy lips continued to draw thread-thin breaths, the boy licked his own lips and brought them closer.

The door abruptly opened just as their lips were about to come together. It was an android sentry.

"What do you want?"

"The enemy is approaching. Please come with me."

The android came closer.

"Where are we going? What's the count doing? And what about D?"

"Both of them are fighting a defensive action. I will deliver the two of you to a safe area."

"But—"

The instant his field of view was filled by the pale blue light that shot from the sentry's right side, Matthew wondered if heaven weren't punishing him.

III

In the operations center, D, who'd paid a call on the infirmary, informed Count Braujou that the two children were missing.

"They're *gone*?" the giant said to the three-dimensional, holographic image of D, giving him an intense look as he took a swipe with his long spear. Three androids were sent flying, only to collapse and burst into flames.

"The sentries have been felled? What the hell have the security computers been *doing*? Rest assured—no matter how they got in here, so long as the barrier is up, they can't get out of the fortress."

"If they could get in, they can also get out," D said softly. "As long as Valcua is here, the barrier means nothing. I'm heading out."

"Very well, I'll go with you."

The Nobleman had intended to join the fighting all along, but after the computer notified him of D's battle with Seurat, he'd gone to the operations center with hopes dashed. In his heart, his wicked Noble blood ran hot.

When the count got to the combat exit, D was already astride a white steed. They hadn't summoned a single android soldier. The two of them pushed their way into the thick of the enemy troops, who swarmed like bees. Neither of them found it strange.

"Take these," the count said, throwing the Hunter something that looked like a pair of goggles.

"They're an information terminal. An SRPV surveillance drone has already been dispatched. It should locate the children within two minutes' time. When it does, I'll cut a path through the enemy. You'll have to rescue them, D."

Of course, there was no reply to this.

D put the goggles on. They fit well—their weight was negligible and they didn't seem bulky. They didn't affect visibility, either.

"Give them commands verbally. We'll soon—"

That was as far as the count got before glowing green lines made a topographical map that filled his field of view. Four luminous points were on the move.

"Expand those points."

Instantly, they took on the form of three humans and an android. Seurat and the android were carrying Sue and Matthew draped across their shoulders.

"The forest to the west," the count said, and then the fugitives halted.

A cyborg horse of twice the normal size was tethered to the trunk of a colossal tree.

"On horseback, he'll make for the highway to the west and keep going all the way to Valcua's domain—he must intend to head north.

Let's give chase!"

The count was also astride an enormous horse. Behind him was his car.

"It looks like the night will be at an end soon," he remarked in an unusual tone that made it sound like he was making excuses.

He then turned to D and asked, "What happened to your left hand?"

It was missing from the wrist down.

"It's on the job," D responded.

Whether repairs to the reactor were going well or not was unknown.

"Well then, let's go!"

At the same moment the count pulled the reins of the gigantic steed, the doors opened. From there they went straight through the central courtyard, where a black dirt road stretched toward the distant gates.

First went D, followed by the count and the car. Thirty feet away, the main gates opened. The words "Barrier removal" danced across their goggles. At the same time, crimson streaks of light flew all around the pair. Struck by them, a portion of the ramparts instantly evaporated.

They crossed the bridge. About a thousand yards ahead, the enemy forces pressed forward. In front of them a titanic pillar of flame went up. The fireball that swelled from it swallowed all their foes in a fifty-yard radius. It was the work of a miniature missile launched from the fortress.

The air was still searing hot as D and his mount bounded forward. The reins were wrapped around his left forearm, while his right hand merely rested on them. As the white steed galloped like it was possessed, the enemy troops closed on it. From the horse's back, a stark flash of light mowed through them, and they fell. Severed heads and torsos promptly changed into dead branches. Valcua's magic was gone.

A blue light mowed down enemies with rifles at the ready. The blistering particle beam of seven hundred thousand degrees was fired from a cannon mounted on the roof of the count's vehicle, and it evaporated not only the soldiers, but also trees and earth.

However, ahead of the pair the enemy milled in a thick black swarm, firing beams and missiles at them. The count's car was hit by the shots, and the count himself received wounds all over his body from flames and shrapnel.

Can we catch up? he wondered.

The count's internal clock was also telling him dawn was nigh. As the enemy soldiers piled up, not seeming to have dwindled in numbers

at all, the first doubts crept into the count's mind.

Will we make it in time?

Just then, the air froze. Shouts and shrieks from the enemy—in fact, all sounds—were completely silenced. Even the wind died out.

"What was that?" the astonished count said in spite of himself. He was asking D. Why did he think D knew the reason for this unexpected silence?

D gave an abrupt kick to the flanks of his steed.

For some reason the count forgot to try to stop him, and he was unable to even follow D, but rather watched the young man's fate unfurl.

"What's this?" Braujou cried out, and rightly so.

In front of the galloping D, the soldiers that fell beneath his horse's hooves were suddenly transformed into dead branches. D dashed right through an army of thousands, if not tens of thousands, leaving nothing but trampled tree limbs strewn in his wake. The magical might of Valcua—the Ultimate Noble—had been broken!

"What in the world *is* this fellow?" the count groaned, finally giving his horse a crack of the reins.

After racing down the highway for about twenty minutes, Seurat heard the beating of iron-shod hooves ringing out behind him. The android carried Sue and Matthew on the back of the giant's steed.

Turning around, Seurat was expressionless as he said, "I underestimated them. No doubt only the man known as D could've smashed through those military forces to give chase. Grand duke, what would you have me do?"

He posed this question to empty space.

A grave answer came in return.

"Just keep going. I've taken measures."

"Yes, milord!" Seurat responded, feeling a chill run down his back.

Only three hundred feet to go. D's cyborg horse was rapidly closing on the enormous steed up ahead.

Riding another three hundred feet behind him, the count's eyes widened as he said, "Such speed! I'm glad it's not me he's after—well, actually he *is* after me, isn't he? At any rate, I'm glad it's not me today."

He watched as the black figure of D dwindled at an astounding rate. A second later, the count gasped. D had sunk without warning. And not just him, but the gigantic horse ahead of him as well. The ground had collapsed. And the black chasm was headed straight for him.

"This is bad!"

The Nobleman jerked the reins to make a sudden stop, but his body went flying through the air. In midair, the count saw his cyborg horse trip and the car behind it slam into the beast.

A section of road twenty feet wide and four hundred and fifty feet long had given way. It wasn't an explosion or an earthquake. The molecular structure of the ground had been altered, leaving it in an extremely weakened condition.

Were these the "measures" Valcua had taken?

As the ground swallowed him, D took the reins in his teeth. Using the strength of his two arms and his mouth to control his cyborg horse, he demonstrated a feat that could only be described as wondrous. Though his steed had sunk up to the Hunter's knees into ground that now resembled pumice, it went no deeper. Skillfully working its four legs, the horse moved relentlessly, as if seeking solid footing.

No longer sinking but still not rising, D watched as Seurat, his giant steed, and the siblings were swallowed by the colossal cavern that opened in the ground.

A sound became audible. A splash. Obviously there was a river running deep underground.

The earth and sand suddenly began to subside much more quickly. The water had begun to wash them away.

Seurat and the others were swallowed by the darkness.

It took about ten seconds for D to hit the water. Cyborg horses could swim across rivers where it was too deep for people to stand. However, the current here trumped that ability.

As he was swept away, mount and all, D focused his gaze behind him and ahead of him. He couldn't see Seurat, his gigantic horse, or the Dyalhis siblings. All that flowed through the massive underground cavern was black water. The cavern must've been at least thirty feet high.

Unexpectedly, the Hunter's horse sank. Something had dragged it underwater. And D went right with it.

The Nobility—and others with vampire blood—were known to have problems with water. Of particular note was their inability to cross running water. When completely immersed, a dhampir lost almost all of his Noble strength, leaving him with only the power of a normal human being at his disposal.

Even underwater D's eyesight was perfect. Leaving the saddle of his cyborg horse, he drew his sword.

The woman who appeared from behind the white steed had a long, white robe streaming out behind her like the garb of the celestial maidens. It was the water witch, Lucienne. Although this sorceress had been evaporated by the flames from a torch, she'd apparently

survived by fleeing underground.

"So nice of you to come into my country, D!" she said, her voice as sensuous as ever.

However, the right side of her face was melted and her lips were half gone, leaving teeth and gums exposed. Scorched by fire on the ground above, it appeared she hadn't been healed even after returning to the font of her life.

"You may be invincible on dry land, but you can't defeat me here. Eventually I'll tear Count Braujou and Duchess Miranda to bits in my world, too. But you shall be the first."

A white piece of fabric closed on D. Lucienne had pulled it from her clothing. No doubt her raiment was composed of many such pieces stitched together.

D swung his sword. The fabric didn't fall apart. It wrapped gently around the blade, robbing it of its cutting edge.

Lucienne laughed seductively. Her clothing had already broken down into a number of strips that lingered around her naked form as if loath to leave her. Her pale female physique had retained its perfect beauty, and even half-melted, her face had lost none of its former loveliness, giving this sorceress an allure beyond compare.

Her right hand pointed at D. Cloth flowed over and latched onto his shoulder, upper arm, and wrist, winding around D from the right shoulder down to the waist. His sword arm was restricted. Another strip wrapped around his throat like a pale arm.

Bubbles rose from D's mouth. His air had run out.

DUCHESS MIRANDA

CHAPTER 2

I

Through the cloth she used to strangle him, Lucienne could feel the strength swiftly ebbing from D's form. Five millennia earlier, she'd fought a number of dhampirs. She'd slain all of them. This young man was a tougher opponent than they had been; she'd have to choke him twice as hard.

All signs of life had already left D. Lucienne laughed maliciously as she knifed through the water toward the Hunter. Just to be sure, she would use her special claws to tear the flesh from his bones. The sword D gripped didn't concern her. Who would've expected it to hack through her from the top of her head all the way down to her cleavage?

Writhing in intense pain, Lucienne found her field of vision tinged with red.

Seeing that the water witch had dissolved into the black fluid streaming past him, D kicked up through the water. His face broke the surface, and his lungs took a savage breath of air. Though he was several times as powerful as the average dhampir, it was still difficult for him to go nearly ten minutes without oxygen.

The Hunter had no intention of getting out of the water—Sue and Matthew had gone downstream. In the incessantly gurgling subterranean waterway, D caught his breath as he was swept along.

Upon a strike to his cheek, Matthew opened his eyes. A man he didn't recognize was peering down at him. Without noticing the bluish darkness behind the stranger, the boy started coughing violently.

"You have to spit out the water," the man said. What he said next made Matthew's coughing stop. "I'm Courbet the Missionary. One of Valcua's seven."

As Matthew turned to look in horror, his face was like that of a waterlogged corpse.

"I was supposed to haul your little sister out as well, but my singing compatriot is handling that. The current was a bit too strong. At least I snagged you," he said, grinning at the boy's ghastly, pale face.

"What are you gonna do to me?" Matthew inquired in a hoarse tone.

"Not a thing. I'll bring you back to our country."

"Your country?"

"To Grand Duke Valcua's country, that is. Your sister will be going there as well, and that fellow who calls himself D, or something

like that. Not that I approve."

Matthew was speechless.

Courbet continued. Apparently the subject was a sore one for him. "No matter how you look at it, the Hunter is our foe. There's nothing to do but fight him and see who lives and who dies in the end. He should definitely be killed before he gets inside the castle. What can Lord Valcua be thinking?"

Just then, Matthew felt a shadow fall across the sun, and he looked up. What he saw was a night sky tinged with a pale blue that suggested dawn was near. He could make out stars twinkling through the trees.

He felt an enormous presence in that starry sky.

Courbet gasped, "Lord Valcua!"

"I'm not thinking about anything at all. At least, not about anything that concerns the lot of you."

Matthew instinctively looked around but was unable to pinpoint the source of the voice. It seemed to come from both the highest heavens and the depths of the earth.

"Because of that, I shall give you an order in terms worms like yourselves might comprehend: Kill that human."

Courbet's eyes gleamed with surprise as he replied, "Leave it to me, Lord Valcua. I would risk body and soul to do your will."

Matthew felt the presence vanish. Knowing what fate lay in store for him, he was relieved at first, then horrified.

Courbet stood up. "I suppose the least I can do is let you choose how you'll die," the missionary said in a tone that was all murderous intent and mocking sneers. "Would you like to have another go at drowning? You could strangle yourself, slit your own throat, or maybe __"

Matthew leaped up with a shout, charging at Courbet head first. But he was too slow. Dodging to the left, the missionary brought the side of his hand down on Matthew's neck in a chop.

"You're too stupid to see when someone's trying to do you a favor," Courbet laughed, extending his right arm. Beside him, branches jutted from a tree. Snapping off a relatively straight one with a single twist of his wrist, he held it like a spear as he walked over to where Matthew lay groaning on the ground. "In the service of the grand duke, I've done battle with Nobles, but I never used the legendary method against them. Isn't it ironic that I should first get to try it on a human being?"

Raising the branch with both hands so the jagged break was like a stake, the missionary began to swing it home. But he froze in place. Something had latched onto the end of the branch and stopped it.

D? he wondered. Not concerning himself with the branch, Courbet

released it and leaped back. There was no one where he'd just been. Icy breath crept across the nape of his neck.

"Wooden stakes really should be saved for the Nobility. Or for their abhorrent servants."

Behind me again? the man thought, and he was about to spit a curse when a stake pierced him through the back with feverish speed, running through his heart. Letting out a final breath, Courbet staggered. He tried to take in more air, but his lungs disgorged something else. Fresh blood splattered against the grass at his feet. He took a few more steps, and then turned.

The woman in the white dress possessed the poise and beauty that made it clear at a glance she was a Noble.

"You—you bitch! You're . . . Miranda . . ."

"That's *duchess* to you."

Approaching him without a sound, Miranda grabbed the tip of the branch that protruded from Courbet's chest and twisted it this way and that. Screams split the darkness, and the blood that sprayed from him stained the duchess's pale face and breasts a deep red. She possessed a countenance so lovely it would've rivaled that of Sotoori-hime, a legendary princess so fair her beauty glowed through her attire. Seeing the duchess lick the blood from her mouth, Matthew felt his mind drifting a million miles away.

"Forgive me . . . milord . . ." Courbet coughed through bloodied lips before he collapsed in the grass and moved no more.

Matthew stared at his savior, dumbfounded. He realized the battle wasn't over. Back at Lamoa Fortress, D had told him about the powers of Valcua's assassins. Acting on reflex, he put his right hand in his pants pocket. It closed tightly around the hard objects his fingertips brushed, but he thought to himself, *These probably won't do much good.*

The plastic earplugs were something D had given him back at the fortress to use against Courbet.

"Aren't you a fine fool," the duchess said, making no attempt to hide the scorn in her eyes. "Even with that Hunter and the count to protect you, I find you out here in this remote place, all alone, at this hour—you've brought this all upon yourself."

"No . . . it's not like that . . ."

"At any rate, you've been saved. I'm a woman, so I'm more calculating than those other two. But sooner or later you'll have to repay me for this."

As she spoke, the duchess walked up to Matthew. Her right hand seized the collar of his shirt. Without bending her knees or even bracing her feet, she hoisted Matthew into the air with a single slender limb. Using her left hand to point, she said, "If you go that way, you'll soon be out of the forest. I must be going now. The dawn is like a

death knell."

And then the pale Noblewoman dissolved into the feeble light, and Matthew collapsed on the spot. There was a dazed look on his face. Though he understood what had transpired, he remained numb. It took a good minute before a human emotion could force its way onto his expressionless face.

The Noble or his assassins would probably be coming for him again. Matthew got up and started walking with leaden steps in the direction the duchess had indicated. Gradually his pace quickened, and before he'd gone ten strides he was running full speed.

Sue remembered everything. Though the things that had happened while she was under the hypnotic gaze of her android guard had seemed like a dream, the memories themselves were clear. The spell had been broken when she was immersed in the subterranean river. She'd been immediately pulled out and lifted high in the air—such was the strength of Seurat's powerful arms. She had no idea how far the dark water had carried her. Perhaps she'd been swept along for two hours or more. Suffering a terrible blow, Sue had lost consciousness.

Apparently it was the sunlight that awakened her—the light that now hung around her was the glow of dawn. Sue was in a rocky area. Her joints ached, but she was able to move. She looked all around. Seurat's enormous form had fallen at her feet. He rested there like a stone, not moving a muscle. As he lay flat on his back, Sue pressed her ear to the left side of his chest. A beating came through like a rumbling deep in the earth. On realizing that she was relieved, Sue was terribly surprised. This giant had held her up out of the water the whole time they'd been swept downstream. Although it was his duty, it couldn't have been an easy thing to do.

By the girl's feet yawned a crevasse that looked to be a good thirty feet long. The strange stones and towering boulders that surrounded it appeared to point toward the chasm. A splash resounded. Seurat must have pulled Sue from the subterranean waterway and crawled this far before his strength failed him. He was probably injured.

Running her eyes over Seurat, Sue gasped. A red stain was spreading in the area just beneath the right side of his chest. Something pale jutted from the center of the stain.

"One of D's?"

It was a needle. He'd probably been pierced by it as they were falling into the subterranean waterway.

A strange feeling took hold of Sue, and the girl was surprised that she was ready to act on it. Though it was a perfectly natural instinct

under the circumstances, Sue knew she would be inviting her own destruction.

You have to help those who are suffering, she thought. The giant was an assassin sent to drag her into Valcua's deadly trap. They were fighting for their lives, and D's needle had been intended to stop him. If she were to act on her impulses, it would completely defeat the purpose of D's battle.

Make a run for it, someone whispered in her head. It was someone Sue knew very well.

Turning around, Sue took a few steps. Then she halted and took a breath. Looking back, the young girl had a certain resolve on her face. Without any further hesitation, Sue ran back to the giant. Squatting down, she grabbed D's needle with both hands.

"I'm sorry," she said. She planted her feet on the giant's chest and took a deep breath.

"Come on!" she exclaimed, simultaneously letting out a gasp. The needle came out with astonishing ease, and, thrown off balance, Sue fell over and whacked the back of her head against the ground.

"Ow!" she groaned, hand to her head as she sat up, her eyes glittering while she stared at the giant. She got up on her knees. Raising the needle high over her head, Sue swung it back down with all her might.

II

D needed to find a horse. His body was failing—water was the bane of dhampirs. And now the light of dawn sprayed like a shower through the interlaced branches and seared D's flesh.

After he'd slain the water witch Lucienne, he'd floated nearly an hour before the water carried him to a subterranean shore. Resting for a while and finding a crevasse to get back out to the surface had taken an additional two hours. Still, he knew where he was. Needing to return to their coffins before the light of day reached them, the Nobility branded the ability to judge times and distances into their DNA. He'd come out about sixty miles north by northwest of where he'd fallen into the subterranean waterway. The stream was moving at more than forty miles an hour. If he kept going straight, he'd soon be out of the forest, and—

There was the sound of footsteps approaching. D advanced without hesitation. Before another minute had passed, a girl in a white blouse and ankle-length skirt appeared. Her blond hair glistened in the light spilling through the trees, and her vermilion skirt seemed ablaze. With her left hand she carried a wooden basket. It was filled with flowers of every imaginable color. The instant she saw D, her willowy

form became a sculpture of ice. The fear and tension that ordinarily would've gripped her were blown away by a rapture that colored every inch of her body.

"Are you from around here?" D inquired, halting.

The girl's mouth fell open in a gasp a few seconds later. "Yes. I'm from the village of Toja, and I . . ."

"Have you seen anyone? A boy of sixteen and a girl of fourteen?"

After some thought, the girl shook her head.

Thanking her, D began to walk away.

"Please, wait," the girl called out when he was about thirty feet away. "Are you—are you a Hunter?"

"That's right." The reason D bothered to reply was probably because she'd answered a question for him.

"In that case, please come with me. I beg of you. My village is in trouble!"

As the girl rushed toward him, the figure in black suddenly began to move away.

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed, but she followed him regardless. The young man in black seemed to be walking at a good clip. But the girl quickly noticed something unusual. Even though she ran for all she was worth, she couldn't catch up to him. The young man never quickened his pace—he just kept walking at the same speed. He was close enough she probably could've reached out and touched him. Nevertheless, she couldn't close the distance between the two of them.

The girl halted. She'd realized if she ran any further, she'd never be able to speak. Her lungs felt like they were on fire as she squeezed a mix of words and air from them.

"Not too long ago—near our village—something unbelievably huge—went by. And after it did—a big pit formed—like thirty feet across—and out of it came some monsters—like bugs and snakes or something. Somehow or other—we managed to kill some of them—but villagers got killed, too—and others were injured. There are still monsters—outside the village. I managed to slip out without them seeing me—so I could collect medicinal herbs. But now—I'm scared to go back."

D remained at a distance from her. The girl's desperate cries meant no more to him now than distant baying borne on the wind. But he halted.

"Please wait—D."

He turned around. The girl was hunched over, her hands resting on her knees as she struggled to catch her breath, when the Hunter asked her, "Where'd you hear my name?"

"When whatever it was passed by—"

The girl's voice failed there, and she struggled to fill her lungs

with oxygen. When she finally managed to speak again, her voice was hoarse, as if coming up through her throat had wrung all the moisture from it. “I heard it—then. That a Hunter named D—would be coming soon. And that we—should ask for your help.”

“You were the only one who heard this?”

“No—a bunch of the villagers did. But all were people—with an affinity for spirits.”

“Did this voice identify itself?”

The girl shook her head. After resting a little more, her voice was finally back to normal when she spoke again, saying, “No. But it was really huge and scary. Whatever it was, it was not from this world. I’m sure of that.”

A shudder passed through the girl. Overwhelmed by the fear of the unknown being, she forgot all about her village and the injured people there. D alone knew what it really was.

“If I were to go to your village, could I buy a horse there?”

Waves of hope swiftly broke against the girl’s face. “If you help us, I’ll give you all the modified horses I own!”

As she stared, enraptured, at the young man approaching her, she suddenly felt a sharp tug at her waist. Without asking for the location of her village, the young man in black took the girl under one arm and sprinted off like an exquisite wind, as if he’d known where he was going all along.

Less than ten minutes later, the village’s palisade came into view outside the forest. Screams and inhuman howls were carried on the wind. Undoubtedly the creatures had attacked again.

D quickened his pace.

Just before the rear gate, a caterpillar with a red shell was engaged in deadly battle with a number of villagers. Looking like a dozen bumps fused in a row, its body was a good twenty to twenty-five feet long. The caterpillar’s weapons were the half-dozen semicircular bladed mandibles jutting from its round head. Two vermilion-stained villagers lay on the ground, and another five were also covered with blood. Proof that they weren’t completely ineffectual came from the yellow and red ichor that dripped where a number of spears had stabbed into the bellows-like membranes linking one segment of the caterpillar to the next.

The villagers cautiously surrounded the creature and took aim at its head, but suddenly its body twisted with incomprehensible speed and assailed the men to its rear, who had let their guard down. Taking one last swipe with his longsword, a middle-aged man felt a bladelike mandible drive right through him. The shell where his longsword struck gave a hard ring. The mandibles parted, and the mouth opened, devouring the man. The crunching sounds made the other villagers

cringe.

Without warning, the caterpillar changed direction, looking down. D was by its feet. Still carrying the girl, he didn't even reach for the hilt of his longsword with his right hand.

A command sprang into the brain of the caterpillar, filling it with cruelty and hunger and a lust for battle. It bit through the prey in its mouth and flung down half of it, swallowing the other half, and then it launched an attack on the vision of beauty below it without hesitation. A silvery streak of lightning struck its head—splitting its armor with a vicious crack. Its great lump of a head split in two by a single blow, the caterpillar crashed face first into the ground. With none of the quivering death throes that might be expected from a lower organism, it was reduced to a lifeless piece of meat.

The villagers, dumbfounded, stared at its corpse. The very same monster that had given them such a ferocious battle had been rendered a harmless insect with a single blow—literally with one stroke from a sword. So great had been the change in the situation, their minds couldn't keep pace. Their brains didn't have the means to comprehend it.

The sudden silence was broken by the girl as she said, "D . . . You're . . . you're just incredible . . ."

Letting go of the girl, D walked over to the caterpillar without a word. He kept only his thumb around the hilt of his sword, cupping the other fingers to catch the ichor that spilled from the cut he'd made in the creature. When the girl saw him bring it up to his lips, her eyes went wide. His handsome head arched back. She saw a thin stream of blood fly from his lips and up into the sky.

Dhampirs must be able to spit with great force, because the geyser of blood reached some thirty feet into the air, where it scattered in a red mist. Once D had finished disgorging it, he wiped the back of his right hand across his lips and then simply stood there. And all the while the villagers remained frozen in place. Not because the young man who'd suddenly appeared to slay the hellish beast with a single blow had entranced them with his swordplay, and not because they were shocked or terrified, but because their very souls had been taken by his beauty—or so it appeared to the girl.

Finally, one of the villagers went over to the young woman and said, "Hey, Maquia!"

Just then, a weird howl shook the air. As the villagers turned to look at the defensive palisade, a shadow fell across them. It belonged to the enormous creatures that had sailed through the air and over the fence: a colossal arthropod that looked just like a scorpion gifted with a nauseatingly gaudy coloration and a mollusk that seemed to be no more than a knot of innumerable sucker-covered tentacles. Each of the

creatures was the size of a small hut. The claws of the giant scorpion were wet with fresh blood.

"How many of them are left?" D inquired, but at that very instant tentacles streamed toward him like weeds underwater.

"Just these," a villager replied.

The Hunter seemed to become a silvery flash that raced between the tentacles, severing each and every one of the hideous appendages and leaving them lying on the ground. The villagers took in the action. The deadly battle was over in seconds—but it was something they would pass down to their children and their children's children.

The young man in black seemed to glide in a gentle arc while the giant scorpion closed on him from one side, its scythelike claws extended. The young man swept his right hand down without any particular effort. No one had actually seen him raise it to strike. Sparks flew, and the giant scorpion's claws thudded to the ground. Only later did they learn that the claws were covered by nearly an inch of shell that was every bit as tough as iron.

Taking a step toward the monstrous bug as it tumbled backward, the Hunter lashed out with his naked blade, driving it deep between the creature's beady red eyes and then flinging the massive fifteen-foot-long, two-ton form at the mass of tentacles to its rear with a single movement of his right arm.

The mass of tentacles backed away. As it barely dodged the giant scorpion, the figure in black, following the scorpion's trajectory, landed by its side. Split in two, the mass fell into two halves and ceased moving; almost simultaneously, it became countless individual tentacles that scattered. There was no sign of a body connecting them. It was unclear whether the creature had been a swarm of sentient tentacles or if a single intelligence had united them. The stench of their compatriots' blood told them this was a formidable opponent, and they were massing together again when their foe's blade carved out a deadly world for them.

The rear gate was still open wide, and when the frozen villagers saw the new figure that dashed through it, they finally moved again. Staring at D, one of them muttered, "What in the world are—"

Just then, someone called out, "D!"

Shrieking, the girl pulled both hands up over her heart.

The voice had come from the giant scorpion.

All the villagers were paralyzed.

“There should be no need for me to introduce myself. The girl you were protecting is now in my custody. I believed her brother had been captured as well, but it would seem there’s been some interference. At any rate, I can read the stars. I learned to do so after being exiled to the depths of space. We shall meet sooner or later, D . . . just as the stars say. It would seem that your journey and mine were for that very purpose. Won’t that be pleasant? And then we might finally learn what thread of fate binds the Ultimate Noble Valcua and a lowly Hunter. But in order to find out, you’ll have to keep from being slain by my lackeys. The things you face from here on out will all be monsters whose flesh and spirits I’ve strengthened with my own two hands. I would not think it odd if any one of them were to slay you. If that happens, then it will be fate. I shall have to curse the stars. But just wait, D! And go north as fast as you can—into my world!”

This wasn’t an invitation. It was an order.

The giant scorpion moved no more, but a number of villagers were left reeling, and a few people fainted. Such was the power the source of that voice carried.

Had Valcua created these monstrosities and attacked the village merely to tell the Hunter this? Did the stars of which he spoke portend D’s coming even before his encounter with Maquia?

Sheathing his sword, D asked the villagers, “Do you have any horses?”

In about ten minutes’ time he was all set with a cyborg horse. The villagers didn’t once mention what the giant scorpion had said to D. All they could do was stare in amazement at the far-too-handsome young man. While they gave the Hunter no complaint, they expressed no gratitude either. They just wanted to be rid of him as quickly as possible.

After giving the cost of the steed and a saddle to Maquia, D put one foot into the stirrups. When he got up into the saddle without using his left hand, a stir went through the villagers—they’d finally noticed that it was missing. The opponents that lay ahead were daunting, and now D lacked his left hand.

The young man had appeared without warning and was leaving just as abruptly, and the villagers said nothing as they watched him go.

As the forms of horse and rider became one and they started off toward the road, Maquia rushed over, saying, “Thank you, D. Thank you—and I know we’ll meet again.”

But even she didn’t believe the last remark.

“I don’t know what to say at a time like this, but where are you going?” Maquia asked, walking alongside him.

Unexpectedly, the horse broke into a run. D had given it a kick to its sides.

Pulling away, the reeling Maquia somehow managed to stay on her feet. *There he goes*, she thought. They'd met in the woods, and he'd carried her under one arm back to the village. That was it. He hadn't said a single word to her since reaching the village. And yet, her heart burned.

"Um—next month, I'm getting married," the girl whispered, with at least some of her reason returning. Her sweetheart was among the villagers behind her. After going a few paces more, Maquia halted. Tears suddenly spilled from her eyes.

The rider in black had turned left on the highway and was already out of sight.

III

As D galloped north on the road, he seemed no more than a speck of dust to a certain woman. She wasn't underestimating him. Rather, it was a matter of perspective.

Callas the Diva was astride a giant eagle soaring fifteen hundred feet above the earth. A song of unearthly beauty flowed through the air—even birds in the distance seemed to be listening. This eagle had wings that were over thirty feet long, and with the width of its body, its total wingspan reached sixty-five or seventy feet.

Callas and Courbet had received their orders to dispatch D from Grand Duke Valcua in the forest near the fortress. Both she and Courbet had been brought back to life by their lord's power. Valcua had commanded them both to do away with D. He put it this way: "You mustn't let your guard down, but it's not imperative that the two of you work together. Slay him together, and you shall have my praise. Accomplish it alone, and you shall also be rewarded. Ah, yes—perhaps I shall give you control of the moon!"

Valcua had led the starry-eyed pair to the spot where D and the Dyalhis children had fallen into the subterranean waterway.

"I leave the rest to you," Valcua said to them before he faded away.

Of course, the two assassins had no way of knowing where the water had carried their targets. Believing they would seek out civilization where they washed up, Callas headed for the village of Toja. Courbet elected to follow the course of the waterway. Its route had been input into his memory at the time of his resurrection—that must've been Valcua's doing. But Valcua's statement that they need not fight side by side was impeding any cooperation.

When Callas reached the village, the weird insects that had

sprung from Valcua's footsteps were in the midst of their attack on the community. Callas had merely watched as people were horribly devoured or chopped up by oversized claws, for no human soul remained in the diva after Valcua revived her. And now she flew across the sky on a giant eagle, following D as he raced along the ground. As she watched his tiny form, now smaller than a grain of pollen, her eyes not only displayed the same rapture that had always been there, but they also held a hint of terrible obsession capable of shaking any who saw it. Most people would've called it hatred. Those with a keener understanding of the mind's workings might've called it something else: love.

"The sun is high, but I am higher still," Callas murmured. Her words were a song.

Her hair fluttering in the breeze, she filled her lungs with the crisp air before looking at the birds that surrounded her.

"Would you care for a bit of exercise?" the diva sang, her voice still gentle.

D wasn't riding aimlessly. Since he'd left the village, he'd been listening to the sound of the water flowing beneath the earth's crust. Before long, the water would be rushing back out to the surface. Where the waterway ended, he should find Sue—who'd been abducted by one of Valcua's assassins—as well as Matthew.

Was the assassin in question Callas or Courbet? D had witnessed Callas stabbing Courbet, and then the two of them being engulfed by napalm flames immediately thereafter. However, that hardly meant that Valcua's subordinates were dead. Or was it another one? The last of the seven . . . the foe known as Seurat.

Whoever it was, having Sue as a hostage would undoubtedly make him or her a fearsome opponent—or so ordinary reasoning suggested. D raced like the wind. Not a glimmer of fear or uncertainty showed in his horribly handsome features. From the very start, this young man had been utterly devoid of feeling regarding those he must slay.

A shadow unexpectedly passed across the sun, as if a cloud that wasn't there had suddenly appeared. D lifted his head a bit to look up at the heavens. The blackness that spread overhead was no cloud—it was expanding in all directions. Or rather, it was drawing closer.

A second later, thousands—or even tens of thousands—of birds assailed D and his cyborg horse. There were little four-winged birds, birds of prey, winged dragons, and great ravens—and while they surged with a beating of wings to shake both heaven and earth, a naked blade danced out.

Holding his longsword in his teeth, D pulled a scarf from one of

his coat pockets and wrapped it around his steed's eyes. He would guide it by use of the reins. A blinded horse would have to be junked, after all.

D's swordplay was neither wasted nor ineffective. Every time he swung his blade, dozens of birds fell to the ground. However, that did nothing to decrease the ranks of his foes.

His horse staggered. The snout of a small, winged dragon had struck it in the nose.

A rocky slope came into view up ahead. The road forked. D chose to go left. Though he would stray from the path of the waterway, there was no helping that at this point. A rusty chain was stretched across the entrance to that road, and a signpost stood beside it. As the horse and rider bounded over the former, the latter listed to one side.

Although Callas couldn't read the words warning of danger from so high up in the sky, the clear and resounding song that she used to control the birds suddenly stopped.

"Why would he go that way?" she mused, furrowing her brow.

Shielded on either side by stone walls, the road ran down a rather steep slope into the bottom of a ravine. As D and his steed made their way down, they were obscured by what looked like a multicolored sea of clouds, or a bizarre gaseous creature. On reaching the bottom, D pulled on the reins. Avian monstrosities and demon birds fell to his blade, but twice as many came to replace them.

"I've summoned all the flying creatures in the area. This is a new power bestowed on me by my liege Valcua. No matter how good a Hunter he may be, it would take him three days to kill them all. Oh, are they down again?"

Spying winged creatures to the north, Callas began to sing her bewitching tune. Perhaps it was out of satisfaction with her victory that she forgot all about the road D had chosen. It wasn't until the moment the flock of birds began to move again that a flash of inspiration sparked in her brain.

"What is it now? Wait—why did he pause at the entrance to the valley?"

D had already advanced about halfway through the ravine. White mists rose here and there like strips of cloth across the barren wasteland, devoid of a single blade of grass. Suddenly the mists grew thicker. That was when Callas noticed what was happening.

"No—get out of there!" she screamed in something other than her singing voice.

Suddenly, the white mist blanketed the bottom of the ravine. A minute fissure that hadn't been evident on casual inspection ran across the floor of the ravine. The white mist that issued from it—or rather, the colorless and odorless gas—killed the thousands of avian creatures

instantly.

Just look. Only D and his cyborg steed emerged from the far side of the white haze. D had memorized a map of the surrounding area back in the fortress of Lamoa, so it was only natural that he'd remember this deadly valley. Of course, the bottom of the ravine wasn't always full of lethal gas. It erupted periodically, like a geyser. D had also committed its schedule to memory, and he'd halted just before entering the ravine because it was too early and he needed to kill some time. He'd held his breath while they galloped through the gas. And his horse, which usually breathed the surrounding atmosphere, had been instructed to rely on its internal oxygen supply. That was the signal he'd given the beast when he pulled back on the reins.

Coming up out of the ravine by another road, D got on the highway. Without decreasing speed, he and his mount bounded into the forest to their left. Not a single chirp was heard. All the birds in the vicinity now slept the sleep of death at the bottom of the ravine.

Letting his horse's breathing return to normal, D swiftly got out of the saddle, went over to the base of a tree about ten feet away, and closed his eyes. Three seconds passed. Five. And then his dark eyes opened and looked up coolly.

"Took refuge in the forest, did he? Ah, such is to be expected from the man who's stolen my very soul. But I won't let him get away. I'll show him it's not the birds of the air alone who fall under the spell of Callas's song."

After muttering this, the unholy singer gave a little cough and then began to fill the air with a clear and resonant soprano. Like an invisible shower, it rained down to fill the ears of every living creature.

When D was nearly finished with what he was doing, he noticed footsteps closing on him from the distance. This time it was the creatures of the land. Those who were closest would probably come barreling through the forest in a veritable avalanche in less than thirty seconds. Sensing their presence, the Hunter's cyborg horse whinnied fiercely.

D got up, put what he'd made under his left arm, and wheeled his steed around toward the right side. Its whinnying stopped dead.

Only one irksome task remained. Drawing his blade, the Hunter stuck his left wrist out in front of himself and made an artless chop at it. From behind him, a single black shape sailed forward—with the speed of a shooting star.

“Take him!” Callas cried from the back of the giant eagle, making a ferocious sweep with her right hand.

No matter how good a Hunter he might be, there was no way D would be able to hold off hundreds of monstrous beasts. Imagining the handsome features of the young man in anguish as innumerable claws and fangs ripped him apart, Callas became intoxicated by her blood-soaked vision. And her besotted eyes did indeed detect a pale object flying from the forest. Mentally and physically Callas was too swept away to dodge it, and it was moving too quickly for her to bat it aside.

Some might call its speed ungodly. Made from the pointed end of a branch, the missile penetrated the body of the giant eagle with ease, piercing Callas in the throat and poking out the nape of her neck. Her anguished cries mixed with those of the bird, sending ripples of sound through the air.

Watching the gigantic bird wheel in circles as it fell, the Hunter cut down the last of a dozen tigons just as it was about to pounce, and after slaying three more creatures he turned his gaze in the bird’s direction again, but the avian form had already vanished into the distant forest. At the same time, the herd of beasts that had closed to about a dozen yards from him lost their singularity of purpose, the confusion plainly eddying in them, and then in the blink of an eye they scattered. Though a number of them went for D, they achieved nothing, becoming sacrifices to his sword.

Once stillness had returned, D got back on his unharmed steed and put the forest behind him. After he’d gone, all that was left behind was a thick branch with a vine strung from one end to the other, making it into a bow. It went without saying what had become of its sole arrow.

Branches and vines—what kind of skill did it take to fashion a bow from these materials alone, use it to fire an arrow that was just a thin branch honed to a point, and score a direct hit on a siren fifteen hundred feet away? And there was more to it than just that. D’s left hand was missing from the wrist down, but fresh blood dripped from where a vertical cut had been made in the stump, because the Hunter couldn’t use the bow with just one hand. He’d actually split open the end of his left arm and wedged the bow’s riser in it while his right hand drew the bowstring. And as he pounded from the deadly ravine into the forest, the reason he’d listened hard was so his superhuman hearing might deduce Callas’s position in the sky.

That, in a nutshell, was what it meant to be “D.”

SEURAT

CHAPTER 3

I

On regaining consciousness, Seurat must've been surprised. The face of the giant, who stood more than thirteen feet tall, was awfully blank. It was unsuited to expressing thought or emotion. Nonetheless, he *was* surprised—that was clear from his eyes as he gazed at Sue. Not only hadn't the girl run away when D's needle had struck him in a vital spot and rendered him unconscious, but she'd also extracted said needle and then used it to dispatch a venomous lizard that had been drawn by the scent of his blood. He agonized over the matter of what to make of her actions, and for a while he could do nothing but stare at Sue as she stood by him.

"It looks like you'll be okay, right? Wait a second and I'll go get you some water."

Sue turned around without waiting for a response from him.

The water was nearby. After all, until thirty minutes earlier, they'd been floating in it. By the bottoms of Seurat's massive boots was a crevasse, and a mere fifteen feet away the silvery flow ran noisily by the base of a slope.

Sue didn't have a canteen. Taking care not to slip on the grass, she went down to the water's edge and put the hem of her now-dry skirt into the water. Once she'd scooped up a good amount, her face was reflected in the water's surface. This would serve to let her check on her appearance.

Her face was rippling. Seeing that it didn't look terribly haggard, Sue let out a sigh of relief.

The face smiled—the face on the water's surface, that is. Sue herself wasn't smiling.

The water witch?

No sooner had the name Lucienne and the woman's appearance come and gone in the girl's head than her watery reflection reached out with both hands. As if drawn to it, Sue reached out her own hands, submerging them to the wrist. There was a jerk, and before the girl could make a sound she was pulled into the water—only she didn't go under. Huge hands held her ankles up in the air.

Turning, Sue shouted, "Oh, it's *you*!" Her tone was one of surprise, pleasure, and excitement.

Still crawling across the ground, the giant made an effort to pull Sue back. She rose about a foot into the air.

The thing clinging to Sue's wrists was being pulled up. In the sunlight, it glittered like a fascinating piece of glasswork. Seurat kept pulling. In no time, a face emerged . . . but it no longer looked like

Sue. Due to a trick of the light, parts of it vanished while others shimmered. This bizarre entity had eyes and a nose and a mouth that the girl could make out whether she wanted to or not. It must've been some kind of demonic creature that inhabited the river. Its shoulders appeared, and then its chest.

Was Seurat to be praised for his strength? Was the water demon to be admired for its formidable size? Seurat had already hauled Sue back to the top of the crevasse, but no more than the shoulders of the huge, semitransparent form had emerged yet. The only thing that kept Sue from crying out in pain was that for something so large, the creature weighed little.

Seurat's right hand reached into his robe, and then a longsword that Sue hadn't noticed when she was tending to his wound appeared. A striped pattern ran down it from the tip to the hilt. Seurat swiped it through the arms of the watery giant who wouldn't let go of Sue. Spray shot out, but its hands didn't come off. As if the man had been cutting through water, the wounds he dealt the water demon had closed immediately.

"It hurts!" Sue finally cried out. The more the watery colossus was pulled from the river, the greater its weight became. Their foe seemed determined to drag its prey into the depths.

Seurat swung his longsword again. The blow seemed entirely wasted.

Sue was watching intently when the gigantic form of the water demon suddenly vanished. At the same time, she went flying through the air, landing softly in a high clump of bushes. Seurat had thrown her. Frantically getting to her feet, Sue saw Seurat making three swipes of his sword, and the tremendous glistening form taking a blow to the head in the very same spot where it'd disappeared, then falling back into the flow without a sound. Seurat must've been quite confident, because he didn't even bother to check the river before going over to Sue with his longsword in one hand.

For the first time, Sue was gripped by a chilling fear. The giant was no longer the wounded person she'd helped, but rather a servant of a Noble who wanted her dead. She tried to get to her feet, but her back wouldn't move. Though she'd had a soft landing, her back had still taken quite a jolt.

Before her fear-widened eyes, a titanic hand reached closer with fingers spread wide. An intense pressure closed about her waist, and her body rose. She saw a powerful chest covered by what seemed to be leather armor, and the giant's face above it.

Sue recalled clay figures she'd seen at the village school a long time ago. Among the expressionless horde, there'd been one that looked a little sad. To all appearances it had the same face as the

others, but Sue felt it was an exception. The giant before her brought back that memory.

Sue felt the lump of icy fear thawing.

"Are you—" she started to say, and then the giant's face became that of another person entirely. A tremendous killing lust rose from every inch of him, billowing out like dancing flames, and Sue could actually feel the heat on her cheeks.

Every single sound died out. Even the noise of the water stopped. As all of creation seemed to hold its collective breath at D's beauty, Seurat's will to kill was shaken.

Not knowing exactly what had happened, Sue quickly tried turning her head and body to look all around.

Seurat went into action. Still holding onto Sue, he pulled out his club, put its blunt tip against the ground, and began to scribe a gentle curve. When finished, he had a circle a good thirty feet in diameter—only the two ends of it weren't joined, but rather the final part he'd drawn slipped into the circle a bit. Stepping out through that opening, he went about fifteen feet, then drew another incomplete circle that was about six feet across before setting Sue down in its center.

Once Sue had watched Seurat step back into the first great circle, she saw a figure appear from the forest to her left without making a sound.

"D—uh, Mr. D!"

The girl was naturally overjoyed. However, her heart didn't leap as much as she'd imagined it would.

D shot a quick glance at her. Perhaps that was enough for him to assess her condition, because he didn't ask Sue if she was okay before heading toward Seurat. Having ascertained the safety of his charge, all that remained for him to do was slay his opponent. He was a handsome huntsman braving the raging flames of murderous intent.

Once he'd closed to within fifteen feet of his foe, D reached for the hilt of his longsword with his right hand. He made no attempt to learn Seurat's name or background. The will to kill emanating from the giant was all the proof the Hunter needed.

"D!" Sue called out. She didn't know what she wanted to say to him.

She saw a second D pull away from the first—Sue had no way of knowing that this was due to his speed, which was so great it left an afterimage emblazoned on her retinas. His sword whined through the wind. It seemed Seurat would be cut in two. However, Sue's eyes went wide.

The blade that should've made contact with Seurat had suddenly vanished. There was no attempt at a second stroke—D was making a great leap to narrowly avoid the club swinging at him. In midair the

Hunter launched a rough wooden needle, and then made his landing. But the needle vanished as well.

Sue heard herself gasp aloud.

The blade in D's right hand had returned.

"Look at the ground!" Sue shouted. "He did something—drew a circle. That has to be the secret!"

Seurat glanced briefly at her, and then quickly returned his gaze to D.

D had probably seen through what Seurat was doing already. Both his blade and his needle had vanished into thin air right over the edge of the circle Seurat had inscribed on the ground. However, the circle wasn't complete. The line that should've closed it deviated instead. If D's left hand had been there, it might've croaked, "Why, it's a maze!"

If ordinary mazes were intended to confuse the senses of those who entered and keep them wandering around endlessly, then it would come as little surprise that an assassin in the service of the Ultimate Noble might draw up a maze that could befuddle not only people but objects as well. And when those objects lost their way, they vanished from this world—going off in another direction entirely. Only the mazes Seurat drew could do such a thing. Any physical attack would be nullified the instant it crossed that line, while Seurat, on the other hand, was free to strike at will.

"Uh, excuse me," Sue called over to the giant. "That's cheating. Fight him fair and square."

She never thought her words would make a difference. But something astonishing happened. Seurat stepped out of his circle. He did it of his own free will, but his timing was perfect. Sue was ecstatic.

"Best of luck to both of you!" she called to them in a manner that was both innocent and carefree, but her cheers were frozen a second later. As the pair squared off once more, the waves of murderous intent that crashed together in the space between them were intense. It was nearly noon, the ground was blanketed in green, and every time the wind blew the sunlight seemed to highlight the colors around them—but here alone the forest was frozen with the lust for killing.

However, the battle was short. D didn't make the first move, but the instant the giant's blow was about to smash down on him, he made a bound that left him standing next to Sue.

"D?" Sue shouted as the Hunter brought his right foot down on the circle that surrounded her—she'd felt him enter it.

When D disappeared from the right foot up to the right shoulder, Seurat raced over and swung his club. Without time enough to dodge, D took a blow to the left side of his chest that was like an explosion, sending him flying head first several yards down into the same spot in the river at the bottom of the crevasse where the water demon had

met its fate earlier.

"*D?*"

Driven by emotion more violent than she could've imagined, Sue was about to rush forward. But something odd happened to her. For an instant, it felt like she'd just spun about a full three hundred sixty degrees, and her field of view was painted white. Every sound faded, and Sue realized she was in another place entirely. If she remained there, she might've vanished completely from the real world without anyone ever knowing it. However, her return took place almost immediately. As Sue stood, dazed, the enormous figure had stooped down in front of her, erased the broken line, and completed the circle.

Catching the unsteady Sue, Seurat trained his gaze on the silvery flow that had swallowed D. More than satisfaction at victory, it was the solitary air of a huntsman who'd lost the game he'd long pursued that shrouded his massive frame.

II

The boy opened his eyes, and suddenly a face he knew well was peering down at him.

"Awake now, are you?"

Sue. He meant to say it, but nothing came out.

"You mustn't move," she told him, but he'd already moved both hands and felt an intense pain shoot through them. "You've got burns all over your body. I'm surprised you survived."

Finally Matthew realized he was lying in a bed much like his own, and his entire body was wrapped in bandages like a mummy's. However, that wasn't what slammed him deep into a pool of despair.

It's not her. This girl—she's not Sue.

Her hair was the same color. There was some resemblance in her features, too. But when he looked at her on fully regaining his senses —she was someone else.

"Just three hours ago, you were lying by the entrance to the village. You took the Heat-Ray Road here, didn't you? Didn't anyone warn you about that?"

Matthew's memory returned to him. After having been rescued by Duchess Miranda, he'd wandered around in search of help, coming at last to a kind of depressed region. Suddenly the light of dawn had become a blistering beam. Though he'd tried desperately to escape, it was so hot his skin cracked, and he'd swiftly become deranged. Even after that, he could recall wandering a good deal longer. That he'd managed to do so was thanks to the strength he'd built up working on his family's farm.

"Wh . . . wh . . . where . . . am I?" he asked, and the words came

out more easily than he'd expected.

"You know the central Frontier?" the girl who resembled Sue inquired.

"Uh, yeah."

"Well, near its northern edge. In the village of Rushall."

"The northern edge?"

From the fortress, it was a full week on horseback to the northern Frontier, according to what Count Braujou had told them back at Lamoa. When had he traveled so far?

Perhaps sensing Matthew's question, the girl continued, "Scientists investigating the Heat-Ray Road have established that its secret lies in a distortion in physical space. The atmosphere that should buffer the sunlight is twisted, so the rays come straight there instead. Apparently the same thing happens in a few different places around the world. I don't know how many people like you I've had to help."

For a second, Matthew's mind drifted away. The northern edge—that was the place he and Sue had the most cause to fear. His own feet had ended up carrying him right into hell. Flames of what might be described as pity flared up in Matthew's heart, and he groaned. The flames had taken the shape of Sue's face.

"Don't cry," the girl said, gently stroking the corner of his eye with a pale finger. "I don't know who you are or where you come from, but I'll look after you until you're able to walk again. The medicine I put on you works real well. Why, in three days' time you'll be good as new."

"Thank . . . you . . ."

"Don't mention it. When the going gets tough, we've gotta help one another. They call me Sue. Um, what's the matter?"

"I'm . . . Matthew."

And having managed to reply, Matthew shut his eyes. This Sue's face vanished, but the face of the other Sue was still in his heart. He silently prayed to God *that* Sue's face wouldn't be replaced by this one's.

"Damn that boy—hasn't he shown up yet?" a voice muttered from an enormous coffin.

Lacking even a single window, the room was sealed in darkness. Nevertheless, the occupant of the coffin couldn't come out because it was still midday.

"We'll meet up soon enough. Get your car to go a little faster," another voice replied in the darkness. If it'd been light and any human had been there to witness this scene, it would've scared the living daylights out of him. Sitting on top of the coffin was a disembodied

left hand.

"It's not as if you don't know what kind of condition these Frontier roads are in," the voice from the coffin responded. Needless to say, it belonged to Count Braujou.

"That's the fault of you Nobles," the left hand countered sharply. "You used metals that would last forever to build the major highways your carriages took, while you frustrated the humans' efforts to make roads by leaving tangled forests and supernatural critters everywhere. You made a world of medieval horrors, leaving contemporary people to suffer like serfs, powerless in the midst of monsters and magic. The production of artificial blood had already been perfected. Why didn't you just wipe out the human race in one fell swoop? Your world has no need for human beings."

"That question's been answered by as many people as there are stars in the universe," the count said. "But not one of them can claim to have the true answer. Perhaps . . ."

As Braujou paused, the left hand inquired, "Perhaps what?"

It wouldn't have been strange if the question had gone unanswered.

Nevertheless, the count replied, "Perhaps we all knew what the real answer was. Or rather, we know *even now*."

"Count Braujou, have you ever wanted something that you couldn't have?"

The count fell silent at this new and abrupt query. The left hand's question seemed as effective as an arrow through the very heart of the Nobleman. The voice that issued from the coffin was terribly shaken. And it soon swelled with deep emotion.

"Science, magic, civilization," the count said, his words hanging like castles in the air. "We reached the pinnacle of each, yet one dream still remains unfulfilled—I can't help but think that."

"An unfulfilled dream? A *dream*? Nothing as warm and fuzzy as a dream exists in your world," the left hand sneered. "If you have a dream, then make it a reality. Accomplish your every desire—that's the Noble way. Is that why you allowed the human race to survive? So that your unfulfilled dream wouldn't be *just* a dream?"

If the count had responded, he might've offered a valuable hint to an issue spanning the history of humanity and the Nobility. However, that was not to be. A warning siren sounded through the air.

"There are life-form readings up ahead," a woman's voice informed them. "Two people and one cyborg horse. One is human; the other appears to be a synthesized life form. Distance: two miles."

"It seems we've got one of the kids and an assassin here," the left hand said sourly. "We've been chasing D for two days now. Did we finally catch up to him?"

Just as it said, the two of them—although technically one of them was only a fraction of a person—had left the fortress about an hour after D set off. Transformed into withered branches, all the enemy troops fell to the ground, leaving the fortress secure again. The cause of this was unknown. Having gone out of the fortress to assist D, Count Braujou quickly returned to Lamoa, got the Hunter's left hand—which had been repairing the atomic reactor—and set out in his car. The assault on the fortress had already ceased. All that remained were androids, and the count and D's left hand were solely concerned with the fate of the Dyalhis children and the Hunter's whereabouts. A flying reconnaissance drone had also been dispatched, and it located where the earth had collapsed into the subterranean waterway, as well as where the battle had taken place. But the whereabouts of D, the Dyalhis children, and the assassins remained a mystery. Today, past noon on the third day out, the life-form radar had finally located someone they sought.

"Give us a holographic projection," the voice from the coffin ordered.

The life-form radar didn't respond to outward shapes; it perceived the chemical traces of living beings. It was the computer's job to reconstruct their appearance.

In the pitch blackness, a pair of figures appeared: Sue and a giant.

"Is that you?" the left hand screeched toward the coffin, but realizing there would be no reply, it added, "No, I'm just kidding."

The giant was every bit as big as the count.

"That guy calls himself Seurat. But with a big fella like that, that cyborg horse has gotta be strained to its limit. Are they taking a break or something?"

"That is correct," the female voice responded.

"So, what do we do? Go outside and fight him?" the left hand asked sarcastically. Apparently it was rather peeved that its earlier joke had been ignored.

"Stop the car," the count said.

Without a sound, without even a jolt, the car halted.

It was now the sun-drenched middle of the day. What could the immobilized Braujou do? Making matters worse was the fact that their foe was the same giant, Seurat, who'd sent D flying.

III

Over the last two days, Sue had come to feel a certain sort of relief concerning Seurat. She couldn't completely rid herself of the fear caused by his being an assassin sent by a Noble who wanted her dead, but aside from that she was convinced the giant would never hurt her.

He hadn't said a word to her. It was unclear whether he couldn't speak or just didn't feel like talking, but from the outset to this very moment he'd kept his silence. The source of Sue's faith was the giant's actions.

Seurat had been incredibly lax. When they were riding the cyborg horse, Sue would sit in front of him and rock from side to side without the giant laying a hand on her. She was equally unconfined when the giant would get off the horse and walk after it became crushed under his weight. When they rested, he would trap her in one of his bizarre "mazes."

She was worried about Matthew, and she wasn't about to just stroll into the lair of the very Noble who wanted them dead. Twice she'd tried to escape. When they stopped, she'd jumped off the horse and run before Seurat could make his maze. Both times Sue had encountered supernatural creatures. Fortunately, she hadn't been caught unaware. The first was a spider dragon, which moved from tree to tree snaring its prey in the mucus excreted by its spherical body. The second was a bewilderer—a creature that used an illusion of a human woman to lure travelers closer. If Seurat hadn't rushed in just in the nick of time and worked his magic with his club, she would've been eaten twice over.

After her rescues, Sue fully expected a beating, but the giant didn't treat her differently than he had before. As they traveled, he continued to leave her unfettered.

Though the giant seemed like an automaton, he wasn't, judging from the thoughtful way he reached into his own robe and took out an ointment to put on Sue's injured feet. The timid movements of the gigantic figure coaxed a smile from Sue. The previous night, the giant had tried without success to apply the same medicine to the wound left by D's needle. Unable to restrain herself any longer, the girl offered to put it on for him. The giant remained silent and continued his attempts. Though the wound was deep, it was tiny. All he had to do was apply the ointment liberally, but what would've been a small brush to an ordinary person looked to be the size of a sewing needle in the giant's hand, and he seemed to put it on timidly.

I wonder if his motor skills aren't very sharp, Sue couldn't help but think. Watching him try to do it twice, only to fail both times, Sue finally told him, "I'll do that. Let me out of here, please."

The giant thought for a bit before granting her request.

Taking the brush, she daubed the medicine on him. It was amazing how easy it was to do. Not saying a word, Seurat had taken the brush back from Sue and drawn a maze around her.

Seurat now stared at the cyborg horse, which he'd put inside the same circle as Sue—it was the horse D had been riding. Seurat looked

like an owner watching over his beloved steed. Sue realized that the reason they'd stopped pressing forward in the middle of the day was because the horse was fatigued. Had she not known what the giant *really* was, she'd have been completely at ease with him. The trip would've even been enjoyable.

Sue felt an overwhelming tenderness coming over her. The next thing she knew, a soft melody was issuing from her mouth.

Light and breeze that fill the woods
Kindly take these words
Tell him our yesterdays are forgotten
But our memories of today will be deeper still
Tomorrow, the departed will lie beneath the whispering grass
His voice mine and mine alone

Once she'd finished singing, she realized that the giant was no longer concentrating on the cyborg horse but was looking at her instead. Sue was a bit surprised.

"What is it?"

In his great wall of a face, narrow eyes blinked as if struggling with the light. "Your voice . . . is nice," Seurat said. "It made me remember . . . I was born . . . in the woods . . . too . . . Born in a forest . . . far from here . . . on a mountain . . ."

"What mountain?" Sue asked in spite of herself, feeling a closeness to the giant for the first time.

“I forget . . . But . . . it doesn’t matter . . . anyway.”

“That’s not true. Why, it’s your—” Sue started to say, but then she fell silent. Hadn’t they themselves left their hometown? A feeling of loneliness clung to her bones like a bitter winter wind, freezing Sue in place. Her body trembled as if trying to shake itself free of that spell.

“That’s not true. The place you were born is—”

The sunlight filtering through the branches soaked up her voice. Her words seemed to glow. That glow became an elongated object headed straight for Seurat’s chest that then vanished into thin air. The hand missile in question would probably keep going in another direction for all time.

Seurat stood up. Turning to look, he glared with such intensity in his eyes that Sue felt her breath taken away.

“Count Braujou?”

“It seems you’re safe and sound.” The count reached for a branch that hung in front of him and tried to snap it off, but the branch poked through his fist. “As you can see, I’m an illusion,” Braujou said. Though this three-dimensional representation was a collection of floating molecules, it seemed real enough.

“That’s a maze, is it not?” said the Nobleman. “Whatever’s put inside it can’t be touched from outside. But you can’t strike back, either. Come on out of there.”

Seurat’s massive form rose above the maze, making an unbelievable leap and colliding with the illusional Braujou before dashing clean through the Nobleman. In his right hand he carried his club, while a silvery pair of flaming arrows flew behind him, scoring direct hits just below either shoulder blade. It looked as if a boulder had bounded forward, and pillars of flame burst from either side of his chest. The instant the pair of hand missiles sank into him, the energy they contained transformed into million-degree shock waves.

Seurat fell over, making the ground tremble. Unable to support such weight, the enormous tree that his gigantic form fell against toppled over, tossing up roots and soil in the process. Giant though he might be, Seurat couldn’t bear the million-degree heat waves spreading through his body. His form already shook with a death rattle.

The missile attack had come from behind him—from the direction of the illusional Count Braujou. Indeed, they’d been launched from within his cape. Was the count not an illusion after all?

Walking over to a form every bit as large as his own—one that now trembled with the pain of its death throes—the count grinned. “Depending on the level of cohesion of the floating particles, this illusion can approach solidity . . . enough to launch real missiles or wield a spear. Hmm, you took two hand missiles and *still* aren’t dead?

I shall have to take your head off now."

The count swung the long spear home with his right hand, but it passed through his fingers and jabbed into the ground about ten feet away at an angle. He'd put great power into his swing; it'd proven too much for the weak collection of molecules. That being the case, was the spear real?

With a sheepish grin, Braujou pulled his spear out of the ground. His movements were cautious. Prodding Seurat's torso with his foot, he rolled the giant onto his back. The wounds where the heat waves had burst from Seurat's body narrowly missed his heart. That was what the count would be aiming for. Seurat pressed his right hand to the wound on the side of his chest. The spear was raised high.

"Illusion or not, I'll have you know it could be deemed an honor to be slain by someone bearing the likeness of Count Braujou," the count jeered as he brought his spear down.

Several hundredths of a second before the tip of it struck its mark, the Nobleman probably saw it—the unclosed circle Seurat had drawn over his heart with his right hand.

The tip of the spear disappeared, followed by a good portion of the shaft.

"What sort of foolishness is this?"

The count's mistake was trying to extract the spear. He had only about half of it back out when a sideways swipe of the club came toward his trunk. His spear went flying, and the club passed through his chest before the count made a great leap back, landing in the same place that his spear had fallen. Holding his weapon at the ready, he charged at Seurat. He appeared to be only a few steps from Seurat when something strange happened to the Nobleman. As if an invisible door had opened, he was drawn up into the air.

Suddenly, there was silence. Seurat's gargantuan form looked terribly out of place lying there in the golden sunlight. After about a minute of trying, Seurat managed to sit up and then put enough strength into his legs to stand. The two holes that had been blown in his chest were already fading. That was the unholy power of his replay cells.

He intended to launch an attack on the count's vehicle. Greater Noble or not, in this sunlit hour his foe would have no choice but to sleep in his coffin with nothing save the darkness for a companion. This was a perfect opportunity. No matter what kinds of mechanical security devices the car might be equipped with, it had to be worth a try.

The giant was about to start walking, and then he looked over toward Sue. Normally as expressionless as a stone Buddha, his face rippled with shock waves.

There was no sign of Sue.

It was impossible to enter or escape one of his mazes, but in this case someone had completed the circle, which, ironically enough, made escape from it all too easy.

THE EIGHTH ASSASSIN

CHAPTER 4

I

After Seurat had scanned his surroundings twice and then run off, there was a rustling in the bushes near where the cyborg horse was tethered to a tree, and then Sue appeared. Something strange rested on her left shoulder. It appeared to be a man's left hand. If someone took a picture, it could've passed as an example of spirit photography. But that wasn't all, as it actually said to her, "He left, eh?"

"Uh, yeah," Sue said.

"You know, considering I just freed you and everything, you look mighty displeased."

"I'm not. I'm really happy. But he's not a bad guy."

"Probably not," the left hand said, agreeing with Sue for the first time. "But he's the enemy just the same. In which case, you should hope he gets his as soon as possible . . . but I don't suppose you've got that in you. Get up on the horse. Let's get going."

"Going where?"

"There's a set place for us to rendezvous with the count's vehicle. No matter how hard Seurat looks, he'll never find the car. Still, I've gotta wonder where the hell D is at. He ain't doing much of a job of guarding you, little girl, if I had to find you first."

"Um, D—well, D was . . ."

"What happened?" the left hand asked her, and apparently it sensed something in her tone of voice, because it put even more strength into its fingers. And then it flipped around from behind Sue, did a little hop, and skillfully balanced itself on her shoulder again.

"He had this power used on him, and then got knocked into the water . . ."

"What?"

Sue recounted the battle between D and the giant.

"Hmm, it'd take more than that to keep a man like him down, but water—and running water at that—doesn't sound good. Okay, what do you say we go hook up with Braujou, then go out looking for D?"

"Good enough," Sue said with a nod. She'd been concerned about D all along.

The two rode along for about ten minutes before they came across Braujou's car in the forest. On entering the vehicle, the voice of the count immediately rained down on them, saying, "I see you're fine."

Hearing the unmistakable ring of relief and concern in his words, Sue was a bit bewildered.

"You sounded quite nice," he continued.

"Excuse me?"

“When you sang that song. What’s it called?”

The girl finally remembered what he was referring to. The count must’ve heard her singing from his car so far away.

“It doesn’t have a title. My mother used to sing it all the time.”

“Hmm. Very well, then. Off we go. He’ll be coming.”

“Good,” Sue said, feeling relieved. Her rescue could be concluded without Braujou and Seurat having to fight each other.

“Good? What’s good?” the count inquired.

“I—I don’t want to see either of you get hurt,” the girl replied, feeling safe.

But the count’s response carried a force and hostility that made Sue grow pale. “Oh, so the abducted lass is concerned for the well-being of her abductor? How interesting! Now I shall have to stay and see what this fellow is made of.”

“That’s not what I meant to—” Sue countered desperately. “It’s just—he’s really not a bad person.”

“Bad or not, he’s the enemy. He’s out to take your life. And we must defend you.”

Sue didn’t notice the anger and envy running through the Nobleman’s words.

“Where might the enemy be?” Braujou asked.

The car’s female voice responded, “Six hundred and nine yards north-northwest of here, milord, and he’s currently wandering the periphery.”

“Very well, take us there.”

“Wait!” another voice interjected. It was the left hand sitting on Sue’s shoulder. Its forefinger pointed straight up at the ceiling—in Braujou’s direction. “I could’ve sworn you just said defending her is your job. Stay and fight, and you’ll only be courting disaster. You’d also be betraying your own promise.” Its tone was rather dignified.

After a momentary silence, Braujou’s voice rang out. He sounded somewhat crestfallen as he said, “Disregard that last order. Return to the fortress.”

As relief settled over Sue once more, the left hand tapped her lightly on the shoulder.

Seurat could make out the sound of the car’s engine in the distance. Though he’d been running after it at full speed, he hadn’t caught a glimpse of the vehicle before he could no longer hear it. Determined to set out after it again immediately, he went back for the cyborg horse he’d left behind, but the mount had vanished, most likely the work of whoever had taken Sue—the same person who’d beaten the iron walls of his maze.

He stood still in defeat.

"Messed up, didn't you?"

Seurat looked to the right. A form in a crimson, hooded robe stood among the interwoven trees. The figure sounded vaguely like an old woman, but neither its face nor its hands could be seen.

"I am Kima—an instrument of the grand duke's power," the crimson figure said. "The load you bear is too heavy for you to bring the rest of the way. So I have orders to assist you."

The giant didn't know how to respond to this.

"I won't act directly. I'm here strictly in a support capacity for you. You should keep that in mind. Now, as to the car you're after—I've arranged so that Count Braujou won't make it back to the fortress. Once you've thought of a way to slay him, you may pursue him at your leisure."

He sensed someone entering the room. It was probably Sue. Matthew opened his eyes. His eyelids didn't sting as much as they had before.

"My, but you've been hurt badly."

Every inch of the boy stiffened immediately, and not because the hoarse voice reminded him of D's left hand. Rather, it was due to the malevolence of its mocking tone.

"Who . . . are . . . you?" he managed to squeeze out in a thread-thin voice. Due to the strength of his medicine, his lips wouldn't move.

"An instrument of the grand duke's power," the voice continued. "And my job is to bring you and your sister back to the grand duke's domain. You see, those initially sent to do this proved unexpectedly inept or else got themselves slain . . . though that does reflect the power of those guarding you. Don't move, boy. You'll split your skin open again just when it's starting to heal. My name is Kima."

Matthew was at a loss for words.

"I've come here to get you, but I won't force you to go. I'll just arrange it so you choose to go to the grand duke of your own free will. Oh, you mustn't get up!"

The old, hoarse voice suddenly became a youthful, buoyant one, and the presence the boy sensed morphed into that of someone else entirely.

"I told you you weren't supposed to move. You're such a handful."

"Is that you . . . Sue?"

"Yes, it is. Okay, now roll over onto your side."

With the girl pushing against his shoulder, Matthew's hand hit the hard floor.

"Wasn't there . . . someone else . . . in here . . . just now?"

"Not a soul. But now that you mention it, when I first came in, for a second I thought I saw something red—but it was only my

imagination."

Life on the Frontier was hard. People couldn't be bothered to worry about the harmless visions or dreams that evil spirits or mirage beasts made them have.

"Medicine time—I'll change your dressings."

Sue's ministrations were warm and personal. Removing his bandages, she wiped away the old ointment with gauze before carefully sponging his body off with warm water.

"You've gotten a lot better. It'll be fine for you to talk now. I suppose it might be okay for you to walk around, too."

"This is your house, isn't it?" Matthew asked, his mouth finally free again.

"It sure is."

"You sure it's okay for me to stay here and everything?"

"I'm all alone anyway. Don't worry about it."

"And people in the village—they won't say anything about it?"

"Never mind about them," she replied, sounding somewhat peeved. "That shouldn't concern you. I'll be sleeping on the sofa anyway. Don't try anything funny."

Applying new ointment, she wound the bandages around him again, but this time he only needed them on his chest and part of his back.

"Okay, that should do it!" she told Matthew.

"Thank you—but I've got to leave."

Sue's eyes went wide, and she said, "Excuse me?"

"I don't wanna impose on you any more than I already have, and I have a little sister to get back to. I've gotta get back to her as fast as I can. I'm sorry, but could you loan me some food and a horse? I promise I'll get them back to you later."

"You don't have to give them back to me," Sue said. The terribly grave expression she wore stunned Matthew. "But in return, you have to take me with you wherever it is you're headed."

"Why's that?"

"Tomorrow, my husband's coming back."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was already planning on leaving, but then when I saw you, I had a change of heart. I thought I'd show you to him and tell him what a good man I'd got myself."

"Just a second now—"

"Relax," Sue told him with a laugh. "On further consideration, that didn't seem like such a smart thing to do. Besides, my husband's big and he likes to hit things. When he went off to the Capital to do some sightseeing, the whole village got together and petitioned the sheriff's bureau, and they ended up throwing him in jail there."

“So, this husband of yours—what does he do?”

“He’s a Fire Dragon Hunter.”

Matthew was speechless.

There were various kinds of Hunters. Those who excelled at fighting vicious monstrosities had to have great skill, and they were assured both fame and fortune. The general consensus was that after Vampire Hunters, Fire Dragon Hunters occupied the next rung on the ladder.

Fire dragons weren’t merely creatures that could spit fire from their mouths. With flames that turned their bodies scalding hot, the creatures could run at speeds in excess of thirty miles an hour as they burned a mountain clear of trees or dried up a small lake in ten seconds’ time. In recent years, an area that was referred to as their “graveyard” had been discovered deep in the mountains. It was said there were surprisingly few bones, but instead large holes beyond number gaping in the ground. The holes were said to be all that was left when fire dragons approaching death used the last of their strength to turn themselves red hot and bury themselves deep in the earth. One theory had it that the holes ran all the way to the planet’s core, and that’s why there were so many volcanoes in that region.

Naturally, the Fire Dragon Hunters who tackled these supernatural creatures possessed sharp minds and powerful bodies, but more than a few of them also visited black-market doctors in the Capital to have their bodies mechanically augmented—to be turned into cyborgs. When they were done with work they ran wild at local watering holes, frequently getting into fights, causing bloodshed, and even murdering people. The chances of finding a moderate and sensible individual among men of that temperament were about as good as those of locating a given leaf in the middle of a forest.

You could say that Sue’s husband was the epitome of his profession. Every time he came back to the village he got into brawls with other men and caused major fights by making passes at other people’s wives and daughters, and those villagers that he beat half to death streamed out of the community. They’d made the petition to the Capital when the village was no longer able to put up with him. And now he was coming back. His heart would be boiling with rage directed toward his wife and the villagers.

“Men from the village are prepared to go out and fight him off, but he’s more than half cyborg parts. Sure, the Capital’s sheriff’s office was able to take him into custody, but out here, it’d be like striking a brick wall with spitballs. Let’s hit the road.”

“Yeah, I guess that’ll work,” Matthew replied, but the situation had changed so drastically that his response was halfhearted. If she was going to ask him to run off with her, why’d she say anything

about introducing him to her husband? There were too many things about this young woman that Matthew couldn't fathom.

"I didn't think you'd recover from your burns so fast, but it looks like you're gonna be all right. I suppose the first thing he'll do is come right out here to kill me. Well, let's take off."

"You—you mean right now?"

"Of course. I said he's coming back tomorrow. That means we should go tonight. We could stay here, but folks in the village know you're staying at my house. There's no telling what they might say."

"Hey, you're threatening me!"

"It's not like I've got much choice. What's it gonna be?"

"We'll go." There was no way he'd give any other answer.

Less than an hour later, a pair of figures on cyborg horses hastily fled the slumbering village.

The Frontier by night was an unholy world. They carried weapons for that reason, and Matthew gripped a flamethrower with hands that still bothered him. The tank of oil was on his back.

Once they reached the highway that ran out of town, Matthew learned that all Sue's work had been for nothing. When he told her the location of the fortress, Sue said, "That'd be this way," and pointed to one end of the white ribbon of a road, but then she suddenly froze. Matthew followed her finger, and then he too was left immobilized.

By the light of the moon, a figure on a cyborg horse was slowly approaching.

"Your husband?"

"Yeah," Sue replied absent-mindedly. Riding up beside the boy, she leaned over and told him, "As soon as he comes into range, blast him."

"But that's—"

"Do you wanna *die*? It's kill or be killed!"

How he wished the other Sue were here.

II

The horse stopped. The figure on its back raised one hand to eye level. Matthew noticed he wore a heavy helm and goggles. From the neck down he was covered in armor. Cold sweat ran down the boy's cheeks.

"Over there—is that Sue I see?" the man said, his voice rolling through the night air like a wild and heavy howl. "Your darling hubby has returned. You had some nerve letting me stay locked up in that hole all those years."

"I don't wanna hear it," Sue shot back. "They should've kept a savage like you in the Capital for the rest of your life. Don't you get it?

This here is my new fella. And unlike you, he's really nice. Why'd you bother dragging your sorry ass back here? Why don't you run back to prison?"

"You little bitch!"

Matthew saw the man's right hand sweep out. There was easily thirty feet between them. Did he have a rifle?

The wind whistled. Something long and thin uncoiled in the man's hand—but Matthew only realized this when the flamethrower tucked in his belt had been knocked away.

"Is that—a whip?"

"It sure is," the man snickered. "It's made of a special steel that can pull the legs out from under a fire dragon or wrap around its neck to choke the life from it. It'll rip your head right off your shoulders."

"Make a break for it, Sue!" the boy shouted as he wheeled his horse around to the right. The forest lay there dark and deep. He gave a frantic kick to his mount's sides.

Right by Matthew's ear, a shot rang out. It was a heavy sound that numbed his eardrum—the blast of a shotgun.

The man's cyborg horse slumped forward.

"Into the forest!" Sue cried out, wheeling her own steed around. Purplish smoke spilled from the shotgun in her right hand. The barrels had been sawed off so it could be used to deal with multiple opponents at close range. Each shell held twenty balls of shot.

The dozens of yards between them and the forest would be hell.

Looking back, the boy shouted, "He's not chasing us!"

"He's coming, all right!"

At the woman's unexpected reply, Matthew followed her gaze. As Sue rode alongside him, her eyes were riveted to her left and below—trained on the ground that lay between the two of them. Matthew's own eyes bulged in their sockets. Something like a snake was rushing through the grass. A whip. The steel whip had come after them.

Suddenly it leaped up toward Sue. A blast from the shotgun struck the earth, snapping the whip off. The way it writhed on the ground, it seemed to be in pain as it fell further and further behind them.

"You did it!"

"Did what?"

Matthew was about to tell her she'd snapped off the whip, but at that moment a black shape loomed over them on the right. The instant they passed beneath it, a thud followed after them. It was the trunk of a weir pine twice as big as a man could get his arms around.

"How in the—"

"There'll be more—break right!"

Jerking the reins, he found the world shaken by a titanic specimen of solitude oak.

“What the hell is doing this?” Matthew asked, his tone nearly a scream.

“My husband’s whip. He told you it could strangle a damn fire dragon! To keep him safely out of range, it can stretch three quarters of a mile.”

“Holy—” Matthew screamed. A figure with red eyes leaped up from the ground in front of him. A second later, it was blown back with the sound of a gunshot and fell to earth.

Without a second’s pause, another tree fell toward them. Running on and on, pursued relentlessly, the next thing the two of them knew, they were flying out of the forest.

Abruptly, their horses pitched forward. The riders hit the ground head first—or they should have, but they narrowly managed to fall safely, since both were accomplished riders thanks to their lives on the Frontier. Still, they got banged around enough to leave even their brains numbed.

“Damn!”

“Ow!”

When they looked up, a giant of an armored man stood before them.

“This is—right back where we started!”

As Matthew stared in amazement, the man replied with delight in a vulgar tone, “Right you are. My whip chased you in a big circle through the forest. You can’t get away.”

The whip cracked in the man’s right hand. It appeared to be only ten feet long, and Matthew found it hard to believe it’d stretched over a thousand yards in pursuit of them.

“Oh, I was just kidding earlier,” Sue said, on her knees but moving in front of Matthew as if to shield him. “This guy’s just some traveler. Since he said he was in a hurry to leave the village, I brought him out here.”

“For a traveler, you ain’t got a hell of a lot of baggage, boy,” the man said. Apparently his words were going through a speaker in his helm, because his voice was somewhat muffled. “Well, no problem. I came back here with the intent of killing everyone in the village. One or two more isn’t going to make any great difference.”

“Don’t do this.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take this boy’s head off with one shot. But it ain’t gonna be like that with you. I’ll take a hand, then cut off a foot, and kill you by inches. Now get out of the way.”

“No, I won’t!”

The air whistled around Matthew’s throat and the boy reeled back without saying a word. The man’s whip had maneuvered around Sue to coil about Matthew’s neck.

On seeing Matthew's face turn blue, Sue leaped at her husband like a maniac and slammed her right fist into his face. His helmet was a special metal alloy that could ward off million-degree flames for a few seconds. Rewarded only with a dull thud, Sue doubled over and nursed her fist. And with that, her fruitless battle was at an end.

An impressive crash came from the ground, and on turning her pain-wracked face in its direction, Sue gasped.

Her husband had fallen.

"H—how?" she mumbled, while behind her Matthew coughed. He'd been freed from the whip's constraints.

Walking unsteadily over to her husband's head, Sue opened the latch on his mask.

"He's dead." She'd intended to shout the words, but her fear had crushed them down into a whisper.

Her husband's face had turned ash gray, and it was withered and covered with countless wrinkles.

"He—he's a damned mummy! How'd this happen?"

Despite her shock, she was still a woman of the Frontier. The way she ran her fingers over the face of her husband, who looked like someone who had died a hundred years ago, was remarkable. She even opened his eyelids and checked his pupils.

"I can't believe it. It's true—my husband died a long time ago."

"But . . ." Matthew stammered, kneading his bruised throat while he slowly made his way over. "I mean, I saw him move, heard him speak—"

"He was under a spell. He must have been dead for years. But to have his revenge . . . Hold on. Why'd he keel over right when he had us where he wanted us?"

"I don't know. At any rate, we're safe now. You can go back to your village—I'll go on alone."

"Just a minute—you think you're leaving me here?" Sue said accusingly.

"It's for the best. I'm in your debt."

As Matthew started to back away, Sue hooked her arm around his and glared at him. "I'm not saying you have to spend the rest of your life with me. All I want is to get out of this village and go somewhere else. We'll go together part of the way. You know, I didn't want to bring this up, but I *did* save you."

Matthew gazed at Sue's face. She didn't know that the Sue he saw gradually became someone else.

"That's not right," Matthew muttered, sounding terribly wounded.

To that, Sue could only reply, "What?"

"That's not how it was, Sue. *I* kept *you* safe. From the day you were born right up till now. Yet you're trying to get away from me."

Powerful fingers sank into the throat of the Sue-who-was-not-Sue.

"Letting yourself be tempted by that Vampire Hunter from God knows where, of all people! What kind of position does that leave me in? I can't let you do that, Sue. I absolutely cannot let that happen."

His voice trembled. Matthew's shoulders and arms shook, too, and Sue's body quaked. At the same time Matthew's trembling ceased, the body fell face up on the highway. It was several seconds before Matthew noticed that it was the same woman who'd saved him.

"Sue?"

After desperately clinging to the person to whom he owed his life, shaking her as if trying to start a fight, then giving up, only to go back to shaking her again, he heard a hoarse voice say to him, "You don't know when to give up, do you?"

Even in the moonlight, the figure in crimson seemed to burn.

"She's dead, you know. And only Grand Duke Valcua can bring her back to life."

Struck by the crack of a gun and a fiery blast, Kima was blown back ten feet. The hem of his long robe spread across the ground like flames, gently enveloping him as he fell backward.

"You didn't kill some stranger named Sue. Your younger sister's also called Sue. And it's *your sister* that you murdered with your own two hands."

"No, it can't . . ."

Matthew was going to refute what he said, but he couldn't open his mouth. Kima's statement was correct. It was his sister Sue that he'd killed. The girl he'd loved so well since they were children, and stuck up for, and protected.

How could you betray me after all that? It's all your fault, Sue. I didn't do anything. All I did was choke you a little, playing around.

The shotgun slid out of Sue's hands.

"You can't run from this any longer. What'll you do, Matthew? Will you go with me to see the grand duke?"

"I didn't kill her," Matthew murmured. "I always looked out for Sue, always protected my little sister. I could never kill her."

"No, you weren't able to protect her at all. Did Sue ever thank you?"

Matthew pondered the answer. It came to him quickly. And that was why he was silent.

"As far as your sister was concerned, having an older brother like you around kept the gates to the whole wide world shut. You were a nuisance who kept her locked away in a stuffy little room. Everything you did repulsed your sister, and the praise you gave her sounded like curses spewed by a corpse just back from the graveyard. Face the facts, Matthew. Surely you must've noticed. That's why you stuck up

for Sue more than you had to, kept her safe, concealed the truth. And then, when a man a thousand times more handsome than you started to undermine your dominance, you took your own two hands and—"

"Stop it!" Matthew bellowed, charging at the crimson figure. Grabbing the front of the robe, he reached for the hood, but the garment didn't move at all.

"You bastard!" Matthew exclaimed.

Now the hood was off, and the face that stared back at him was that of the Sue he'd just dispatched. Frozen in place, Matthew felt an icy white arm wrap around his neck, and breath that smelled like foul grave dirt tickled his nostrils.

"I can't believe you killed me," Sue said. "Come with me, Matt."

The instant Matthew realized the face was that of his sister, the girl's arm came away from him, and she scampered off like a startled rabbit.

III

At about the same time Matthew was leaving the village with the other Sue, in the forest seven days' ride from there the following conversation was taking place.

"Why did we stop?"

"The sensors have detected an invisible barrier before us."

"I don't care. We have a force-field projector that was installed back at the fortress. Give it full speed and smash right through it."

"The enemy also has a force field. Anything that touches it is broken down to its constituent atoms."

"And ours does the same thing. It's our power pitted against theirs, with one being absorbed and the other remaining. Go!"

The engine of Braujou's car gave a vicious snarl as it began to speed forward.

Up ahead—only about six feet away—the space suddenly warped like a heat shimmer.

The engine stopped without a sound.

"What is it?" Count Braujou shouted.

"This is dangerous," the female voice said. It sounded like the voice of an incredibly beautiful woman. "The computer has concluded that five seconds after we make contact, space will be distorted, and this vehicle will disintegrate within fifty seconds."

"I don't care. Go!"

"Would you stop already?" said the thing that rested on his shoulder. "Sue's here. Do you intend to have her caught in the middle of this battle between your force fields?"

"Oh, damnation!" the count snarled, shaking the hand off his

shoulder.

Falling to the floor, the hand said, “Ouch!”

“There is what appears to be a person currently approaching from the south-southwest. Aura readings indicate that it is not a human being.”

It was Seurat floating in the air. The holograph advanced through the trackless forest without pause, while ahead of it and around it bushes and titanic trees were pushed away or knocked over by an unseen force.

“It doesn’t seem like he has a force field around him. But he’s trailing us sure enough—someone must be helping him. Give me a view of the living room.”

Sue appeared. Thanks to dimension-bending technology, the vehicle’s interior seemed like the vast and luxurious residence of a Noble, and in one of its rooms, the girl was curled up in a chair fast asleep.

“I wonder whom she’s dreaming of,” the Nobleman said, his tone strangely placid. Looking at the door, the count ordered, “Open it.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” the left hand asked from the floor.

“I’ll fight the foe who’s pursuing us—what else can I do?”

“He’s about your size—so be careful.”

“I wish it were someone other than you wishing me well,” Count Braujou replied before he was swallowed by the darkness.

“That tricky devil—he was all too happy to go. Seems a bit old to be getting so jealous. Ah, the green-eyed monster is a fearsome thing in a man,” the left hand said, grumbling away to its heart’s content on the floor. “Hold on. Tell me I’m wrong. Hey! Open the door to the control room!”

“I cannot respond to any commands but those from my master.”

Extending its forefinger at this reply, the left hand murmured with interest, “Hmm, so that’s where you are?”

Going ten paces from his car, the count switched on the thought-activated force-field device he wore on the right side of his chest. As it was attuned to the barrier around his vehicle, he had no problem slipping through it. The unearthly aura that blazed from every inch of him was undoubtedly the hatred he felt for his approaching foe. However, the count didn’t comprehend the clinging flames of emotion that stoked his hatred the way gasoline fed a fire.

After going another thirty feet, Braujou came to an area that was all shrubs.

“This should do nicely.”

The long spear in his right hand flashed out, knocking all the

scrubby growth away, and then the count stood still in the center of the sixty-foot clearing he'd created.

He didn't have to wait two seconds before a stand of trees in front of him parted down the middle.

"We met during the day, didn't we?" the count said, shifting his gaze to Seurat's club. "I'm surprised you made it this far. Whose help did you have?"

There was no change to Seurat's expression, which could have been described as sluggish.

"Hmm, not talking? In that case, you can keep holding your tongue as I send you to hell!"

Moving with unbelievable speed, the count raced toward the giant. When he was just thirty feet from his opponent, the space between them rippled violently, and the count's body broke like a wave when it burst through. Perhaps because the characteristics of the two force fields differed, the count seemed to be pushing through an opaque membrane as he tried to pierce Seurat's shoulder with his spear. The tip of the weapon vanished before it could touch Seurat's shoulder.

With a low grunt, Seurat swung his club. He brought it down on top of the count's head, but the count was distorted like a staticky TV picture while the weapon passed through him.

"The only thing that can slay me is this spear," the count said, and his weapon flashed out once more.

A line ran through Seurat from his forehead to his jaw, and when it stretched all the way to the hem of his shirt, the front of his gigantic form was laid bare in the moonlight.

The count's eyes were focused on the massive red maze that had been drawn on the front of his opponent's body.

"Hmm. Why didn't you paint one on your face?"

Braujou's spear went through Seurat's face with a thrust that had all his might behind it. Not thinking about pulling it out, the count drove it in as far as it would go. A few seconds later, a complete lack of resistance made his eyes widen. The tip hadn't come out. Seurat's hand clutched the shaft of the spear. The count let out a cry of surprise. Seurat gave a great shake of his upper body and the spear—still jammed into the giant's face—came out of the count's hands.

The fearful moment had arrived. In the time it took Seurat to level the spear he'd taken, the count didn't have a chance to flee. He set his force field to maximum strength.

Space was distorted. Jabbing through it, the glowing head of the count's long spear went for the Nobleman's heart before he could dodge it—but it stopped just shy of impaling him. A hand had suddenly appeared and gripped the shaft of the weapon. A

disembodied left hand.

"Carelessness is our greatest enemy."

The twenty-foot-long spear began to fall, but then suddenly flew back up, spun around, and was hurled with the strength of the left hand alone.

Just before the spear could penetrate Seurat's face he dodged it, losing just some flesh off his cheek—no, actually it was *all* the skin on his face that he lost. The other face that appeared from beneath it had a vibrant red maze drawn on it. The mask he'd worn over it had most likely been intended to keep anything from touching it.

"Well, looks like we've got ourselves a deadlock," the left hand remarked with glee.

“You needn’t have interfered,” the count spat. His body quaked the tiniest bit—not due to having such a close brush with death, but rather from the humiliation of being rescued by someone.

“What are you gonna do?” the left hand inquired.

“Never underestimate a Noble,” the count said, his right hand reaching into his cape and coming back out with his longsword.

As if in response, Seurat leaped back and bit down on his right index finger. Using it, he drew something on the palm of his left hand.

The count kicked off the ground. He looked like a wild animal pouncing. As he brought down a blow from overhead that would’ve split a boulder in two, Seurat caught the sword in his left hand. Its blade disappeared, for the giant had drawn a maze in blood on the palm of his hand.

The count poised himself for a second blow. But Seurat sank unexpectedly. It was neither a feint nor an invitation to strike; rather, he’d tumbled forward. There was no hesitation in the count’s swing. He brought the blade down with no intention of letting the giant escape this time—however, Seurat abruptly vanished beneath its steel.

“Not again, you bastard!” His white fangs bared, the count laughed hoarsely at a stand of trees. “Are you in there?”

Just as the Nobleman’s gigantic form was about to leap forward, the left hand shouted, “Don’t!”

But it was too late, and red spots like drops of dew flowed together on the count’s chest. The screen of the force field was stained crimson. When it faded, the count seemed to have lost his beastly will to fight, gazing into the depths of the stand of trees as he picked up his spear and walked off.

“It seems we’ve just gained another foe,” the left hand said to the count when he returned.

Perhaps the Nobleman was angry with himself for not finishing off his opponent, because he gave no reply.

Nevertheless, the left hand continued, saying, “After luring him out and all, that’s gotta be really annoying.”

“*What?*”

“Earlier, I checked the course logs in the control room. From where we picked up Sue all the way to here, you were broadcasting on a subspace frequency—the same secret wavelength Nobles use to communicate with each other. You used that to lure Seurat out, didn’t you? Were you *that* angry about Sue trying to protect him?”

There was the sound of something knifing through the air before the left hand had finished speaking.

The left hand leaped a yard away. Seeing the long spear sticking out of the ground where it had just stood, it jeered, “Come now, pretty little Sue is watching! I left the view screen on.”

“You little bastard—can you make my car do whatever you like?”

Roughly pulling his spear free, the count headed for his vehicle. Sue’s face appeared in one of the windows that had its shades open only by night.

“Too bad she didn’t get to see you at your best, eh?”

Not replying to the silently laughing left hand, the count made a swipe of his spear, and then walked toward his car.

As soon as they were in the living room, Sue came by. Not saying anything, she stood in the doorway, gazing at the count as he set down his spear and took off his cape.

“What are you looking at?” the count asked irritably.

“Um, nothing,” Sue replied, hanging her head low.

“Did the left hand say anything to you?”

“No, it’s just—well, I just . . .”

“You just what?”

“I was just worried if you were hurt—that’s all.”

“Worried about me?”

“Yes.”

“Did you think a mere servant of the Nobility could slay a Noble?”

The girl had no answer for that.

“Go to bed,” he said without even glancing in Sue’s direction.

The girl didn’t know what to say.

“What is it? Go to bed already.”

“I’m sorry.”

The count didn’t seem to understand what she meant.

“Um . . . I mean . . . thank you.”

This time, it was the count who was at a loss for words.

“You get hurt, risk your life in battle . . . all for our sake . . . But I . . . I can’t do anything in return . . .”

“It’s my job—now go to bed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bowing to him, Sue left. Before the door closed, he heard her thank him once again.

The count heaved a sigh. And a long sigh at that. As if there was something funny or unavoidable about the situation.

Down by his feet, a voice chortled, “You old man, you! All it takes is a thank you to put you over the moon? As Nobles go, you’re a pushover. *Oh, thank you so much, kind sir!*”

A chase then ensued that lasted a good ten minutes, at which point the left hand leaped out of the room.

MATTHEW'S BLOOD

CHAPTER 5

I

It was Sue who noticed something wasn't right. Waking with the dawn, as had been her habit back on the farm, she peered out the window through the still-open shades and called to the left hand on the floor, "This is strange."

"What is?"

"The sun's to our right, so if that's the east, we're going in the opposite direction. We—we're going further and further away from the fortress!"

"That's preposterous," a voice snorted, but rather than the left hand's, it was that of the count. "I was up all night. Even without consulting the instruments, I can tell what direction I'm going. This car is definitely headed for the fortress."

"Wait just a second—the light *is* coming from the east. That's bizarre. Look into it."

With this remark from the left hand, the count ordered an investigation. There wasn't long to wait before a female voice responded, "There's nothing out of the ordinary. We shall reach the fortress in approximately one hour."

However, the natural world beyond the windows offered the two of them a contrary opinion.

"Yes, this really is quite strange. Stop the car," the count said, now that he too realized all was not right.

After the span of a breath or two, the female voice announced, "We've come to a stop."

Beyond the windows, the scenery continued to roll by.

"So, your computer's been taken in, too?" the left hand said. Perhaps it was a quirk of its character, but it seemed to delight in the problems of others—even when it was caught up in the same situation. "Yeah, this is probably the work of whoever's been helping Seurat. That's a formidable opponent. The computer alone would be bad enough, but whatever it is has screwed up *our* sense of direction, too."

That's right, Sue thought, her blood running cold. The Nobleman and D's left hand had both easily fallen prey to this spell.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to leave this to you. I'll send out a projection of myself. You may use it as you see fit."

The count's words overlapped with the creaking of his coffin's lid—the coffins of the Nobility always made this sound. Perhaps their kind had a sort of nostalgic need to hear it.

"Damned irresponsible Noble," the left hand yelled, but then it

quickly gave the command, “Hey, stop the car!”

It didn’t stop.

“So, you won’t follow my directions either, eh? Okay.”

“What are you gonna do?” Sue inquired, no longer able to restrain herself.

“Wait until it stops. Come what may, we’ll be safe so long as we stay inside the car.”

It was more than an hour before the vehicle finally halted. The blinds had closed automatically, so there was no way to view the scenery outside except holographic images, but the computer didn’t comply with the left hand’s requests.

Just then, the lights went out. They were enveloped by the darkness.

“Hmm, looks like we have no choice now. Shall we step outside?”

“We can’t do that!” Sue shouted in the direction of the left hand’s voice. “It’s certain to be dangerous. If our enemies brought us here, they’ve obviously laid traps for us.”

“I agree with you there. But we’re not gonna accomplish anything sitting here like this, either. The first thing to do is let in some fresh air and sunshine, eh?”

“But—can you get the door open?”

“That’s the rub.”

There was a rap down by the floor—apparently the left hand had banged against it. Perhaps it was trying to say the girl was right on the mark.

“Hey, open the door!”

Light beat back the darkness.

“It opened up . . . just as I thought. Well, here I go.”

“But you—” That was all Sue managed before she fell silent. She couldn’t think of what to say next.

Skillfully manipulating its fingers, the left hand leaped outside, and as soon as it did, the door shut.

The car had stopped in the midst of dark earth dotted with cobblestones. Ruins lay up ahead. Marble columns, collections of stones that had formed the foundations of buildings, and sculptures stretched out under the blue sky. Judging from how discolored and weathered they were, they had to be quite old—probably thousands of years.

“Why, this is—” the left hand began to say, its tone one of both astonishment and amusement. Apparently it knew what this place had been. “Hmm, it looks like we’ve come to a nasty little spot. We’d better get out of here quick.”

Turning toward the door, the left hand said, “Open up.”

But it didn’t open. It seemed the hand had been lured out.

“Show yourself,” it called out.

“I’m right here,” someone answered immediately from behind the hand. A figure in a long crimson robe stood there.

“Are you the eighth assassin?” the left hand asked.

“Indeed I am. But I’m not your foe. At least, I have no intention of fighting. If you were to force the issue, I suppose you could call me a sort of rear support unit.”

“Did you bring us out here?”

“Oh, my! I should’ve expected as much from you. Do you know what this place is?”

“The Nobles’ treatment center. Asclepion,” the left hand said. “It specialized in mental health. I’m surprised it’s lasted this long.”

“It didn’t last,” the crimson figure replied. His words seemed to surprise the left hand. “This was a forbidden area. Not too long ago, I dug up the pillars and stone walls and put them back in place.”

“Oh, now that’s something. If there were another of me around, I’d give you a round of applause. Was it also you who took control of our machine?”

The figure’s long robe quaked. He was laughing.

The left hand continued, “Since you did that to bring us all the way out here, I take it you’re not gonna quibble about whether you’re rear support or not. So, are you gonna set things back to normal—or die?”

“By the likes of your group?” the robed figure said, lifting his left arm as if combing through the wind. His hand was badly wrinkled, like that of a mummy. “This was once a cleansing site. The breeze sang, clear water flowed, and the place teemed with life. Best of all, the essence of the Sacred Ancestor lingered here. That was what made the treatments possible.” His hand fell limply. “But time moves on, and at some point the birds stopped singing, and the breeze no longer sighed. The force of life became one of death, and even the essence of the Sacred Ancestor was completely sublimated. Do you know what caused that?”

“That would be Valcua’s life force.”

The robed figure stiffened, as if caught off guard. “You knew? What are you—and what is D?”

“I heard the Ultimate Noble was every bit as ambitious as you’d expect from someone with a name like that, to the point where he tried to destroy all the holy spots the Sacred Ancestor had left around the world. But he was gambling with his life against someone bigger than he could handle. That’s what finally led to his being exiled from the planet. And wherever Valcua’s life force clashed with the essence of the Sacred Ancestor, nothing was left but devastation and ruins. After Valcua was exiled, the biggest job the Nobility had was

completely destroying those ruins. It's said the reason they relinquished rule to the human race was because that task had left them so exhausted."

"Left hand, you've said too much!" the robed figure sneered. "Look! Sensing your presence, the former patients have gathered. You may play with them at your leisure."

The left hand tensed. Among the bright and sunny ruins, pale figures stood staring.

At the same time, the car's engine grumbled. The vehicle slowly advanced into the ruins.

"Hey, stop that! Stop already, would you!" the left hand shouted, but it was no use.

"I don't care for conflict. I'll leave the rest to the patients. Good luck!"

Not even bothering to turn to where the robed figure vanished into thin air, the left hand clung to the outside of the vehicle, ordering it to halt. This accomplished nothing, and the vehicle proceeded to the center of the ruins.

"You leave me no choice," the left hand said, hopping down from the car. At the same time it landed, it clutched a handful of dirt, which swiftly vanished into its palm.

"Gaaaaah!" Unleashing what could only be described as a groan, it spat the soil out again. "What's the story with this dirt? It's been contaminated through and through on a spiritual level. I drank some water in the car. All that leaves . . ."

A tiny mouth opened in the palm of the hand, and the wind whistled as it was sucked in. But it whistled back out again, carrying a cry of pain.

"Even the wind's gone bad. There's a serious curse on this place. Now that it's come to this . . ."

Taking a pebble from the side of the road, the left hand swallowed it. After it had consumed a dozen more, there was a sound from the door of the car. When it looked in that direction and found Sue standing in the doorway, it shouted, "Don't come out here!"

However, sparks erupted behind Sue, and the girl dove out of the car reflexively. The door closed.

"Run for it!"

In response to the left hand's shouting Sue looked around, and then tried to run in the direction the car had come from.

Pale figures were gliding closer.

Fffuuuttt! With a hard spitting sound, a pebble shot from the left hand's mouth. It went through the body of one pale figure, leaving a small hole. The shadowy figure turned and looked. It had no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Yet it laughed mockingly.

Physical attacks had no effect on the ghost of a Noble. However, as they were about to descend on the paralyzed Sue once more, the figures grew tense. Craning their necks, they looked at the hole in the ghost's chest. It had spread twice as wide . . . and still continued to grow.

Ignoring the ghost that was seized by spasms as the hole swallowed it up, the left hand unleashed another volley of pebbles, eliminating eight of the beings in total. However, foes were closing from all sides in the broad daylight.

"Hey, over here!" the left hand shouted. Latching onto Sue's wrist when she ran over, it told her, "Run left. There's a basement!"

It seemed the Hunter's left hand was well acquainted with the layout of this facility. Indeed, when the girl had gone about thirty feet, a stairway leading underground appeared. She galloped down the stairs. Then Sue's breath was taken away.

She saw what looked like an underground lake filled with black water. Stone columns and walkways encircled it.

"What is this?" the girl asked.

"A medical center for treating Nobles with the very worst of mental problems. You see the bronze boats all over the place, right? They'd put the patients in those and let them drift around out on the water."

"But the Nobility—they can't stand the water!"

"And that's why it was used in the most serious cases. Do you know what kind of mental disorders Nobles suffer from?"

"They're not the same ones as human beings?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Oh, go that way. Here they come!"

Instinctively turning to look at the stone staircase, Sue felt dizzy. A number of white figures swayed on the stone steps. Shutting her eyes, she ran.

"This is it—watch out!"

If the left hand hadn't stopped her, she would've fallen off the side of the pathway. First it instructed the girl to get into one of the bronze boats, and then it told her to start paddling. One pull on the oars sent the boat sailing with hardly any effort at all.

"Where are we going?"

"Out to the middle—the center of the ruins."

"What's out there?" Sue asked.

"Something that might help us. Oh!"

Their pursuers had moved to the end of the same pathway where they'd gotten into the boat. Though the ghostly figures shook as if with hesitation, suddenly they threw themselves into the black water without making a sound. But once in, they didn't sink. Waist deep in the water, they gave chase.

We'll never get away from them, Sue thought, imagining that her heart was freezing solid. *D—help me!*

The boat stopped.

"We're there," the left hand said. "We got where we were going, but this still isn't good."

Sue looked all around them. Her eyelids tensed. There was nothing but black water. And from behind them—no, that wasn't right. The white figures were on *all* sides, surrounding them.

"I'm scared. What's gonna happen?"

"Under the water, the essence of the Sacred Ancestor should still remain. It used to fill this whole underground lake and gush out through those skylights to the surface to heal the psyches of patients all over this institution. Now an evil presence has invaded, but the Sacred Ancestor's essence lies sleeping beneath the gunk."

"If we can wake it up, will it save us?"

"I believe so."

"What should we do?"

"The only way is to stimulate the Sacred Ancestor's essence with an equally strong presence."

"Could you do that?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Then what? I don't wanna die down here!" Sue said, desperation in her eyes as she surveyed her surroundings. She started to tremble. They'd come so close to her.

Something cold touched her back. Sue's mind started to slip away as she got the feeling she was being pulled. She turned frantically for a look. It was a young man with a pale, dignified visage.

"What a pretty child you are," he said. "Come to me."

II

The girl wasn't aware that she'd moved, but her body had been drawn backward.

This is the end of the road—but the moment she thought this, there was a flash of white in her eyes. Behind her a scream rang out, and suddenly the movement stopped. The young man's face caved in like the melting man she'd seen in a freak show that had visited her village, and his body was collapsing.

After closing its mouth, which had flames spilling from it, the left hand cried, "Dive in off the bow!"

Not understanding what was going on, the girl went into action. The water was far colder than she'd imagined, chilling her to the bone. She floated. The left hand was floating right in front of her. Seeing how it skillfully clawed at the water with its five fingers, Sue laughed in spite of herself. But this was hardly the time or place for that. She couldn't even see the water more than ten feet away. The white shadows that simply stood there staring at Sue must've numbered in the thousands. All these men and women had what would be called gorgeous faces—except for the incisors that poked from their lips.

Here they come, Sue thought, shutting her eyes, but there was no sign of the ghosts moving. They merely kept giving her vile and clearly famished looks, while some of them went so far as to gnash their teeth.

"Why aren't they doing anything?" the girl asked as she treaded water.

"Weak though it may be, the Sacred Ancestor's essence is here. A little bit of it remains in this area. And they're afraid of it."

"But as it stands, we can't get away from them either."

"Hmph," the left hand groaned as part of the ring of ghosts—those to the right of Sue—collapsed. The ghosts became tangled together. To Sue, they looked like white shadows twinned around each other. One figure pulled away from the group. It had been lifted up by several others. It was still writhing as the other shadowy figures hurled it toward Sue.

Sue heard a scream like nothing any living creature on earth could make. The figure who'd landed beside the girl dissolved in the blink of an eye, scattering in the black water. Another one followed. And another. Every time they screamed, seeming to burn with an all-too-human agony as they melted away.

"They're being sacrificed," the left hand remarked in amazement. "By doing that, they hope to dissipate the essence so they can attack us."

"The ring—is it closing?" Sue screamed for all she was worth.

After fifty of their number had been sacrificed, the Sacred Ancestor's essence had been weakened, and the deadly net was indeed drawing tighter. The white figures no longer dissolved. And then the mob surged forward. Their hands extended, reaching for Sue.

"Help!" Sue cried out loud. *D!*

The ghosts piled on top of her—and then reeled back, screaming. They were snagged by a light. It zipped through the brow of one after another of the tightly packed figures. And then the ghosts' faces split down the middle, and they sank into the water with a blue glow.

Sue was at a loss for words. She saw the blade of a sword stretch

from the water in front of her. Gradually it rose, and a black-gloved hand appeared. When the arm had emerged up to the elbow, a black traveler's hat also broke the surface.

"D?" Sue said, feeling the tears spilling from her eyes. She had a lone guardian against thousands of ghosts—but Sue realized she no longer had anything to fear. In fact, the ghosts who'd backed away didn't show the slightest signs of closing in on her.

"Well, what've you been doing all this time?" the left hand asked, snapping its fingers for emphasis.

Naturally, there was no reply.

"I heard you fell into a river. I'm guessing that river must feed into the basement of Asclepion. If my calculations are right, you must've been here for a full day. Were you sleeping or something? That couldn't be. So, what's down at the bottom?"

Saying nothing, D reached for the left hand with his left arm. The severed limb paddled around neatly, and the two parts were joined.

Suddenly, D's right hand went into action. It was moving so fast that Sue couldn't follow, but the white figures falling from overhead hit the water in four spots without causing a ripple. It appeared to be two figures that had been cut into four pieces.

"They'll keep coming. They need to take the souls of living creatures. And they don't care whether it's a Noble, a human, or a dhampir."

"Dive!" D spoke for the first time after surfacing. Simultaneously, an arm like steel wrapped around Sue's waist, and the girl barely had enough time to take a deep breath before D dove underwater.

It was only about twelve feet to the bottom. In the expanse of black stone, a pile of gunk sat like a thick concrete plug. Sue felt the powerful current. The river D had fallen into ran right through here. Hearing choking sounds from the hand that was wrapped around her waist, Sue looked down at it in surprise.

"Oh, so that's it, is it? Down here is the ol' Sacred Ancestor's—"

Up ahead, something white swayed. The ghosts had pursued them even down there.

Sue clung to D for dear life. So handsome he even seemed to glow underwater, the young man kicked his way through the water straight toward the mound of sludge. Oddly enough, there was no other trash of any kind on the bottom.

Swimming with the grace of a fish, D raised his sword casually. Around him, an army of pale figures pressed closer. Another stark glint filled the water—whether or not it was D's sword was unclear to Sue. An instant later, D headed back to the surface, and black water dripped from the girl's face as they surveyed the empty expanse of the subterranean lake.

“The Sacred Ancestor’s essence—so, that’s where it was sealed away?” said the hoarse voice that rose from the vicinity of Sue’s waist—which was still underwater. “The second it was released, the ghosts were healed—not a bad ending.”

“I feel somehow refreshed,” Sue said, a calm look in her eye as she took in her surroundings. “And the lake looks so nice now.”

“The ghosts have moved on,” the hoarse voice remarked as D began to swim for shore.

The car was right where they’d left it.

“If that don’t beat all. The old geezer’s never around when we need him,” the Hunter’s left hand spat indignantly. “Hold on. The enemy has control of the car. So it might not be too safe to—”

D had just pressed the palm of his left hand against the door, crushing out the rest of that remark. That was his way of telling the hand to get it unlocked.

There was a slight rasping sound as the door opened.

“Control is back,” the left hand announced.

D headed straight for the count’s bedroom. The huge entry opened to allow him and Sue to enter.

“Oh!” Sue said, the fist she’d brought up to her mouth unable to extinguish her gasp of surprise.

“It’s empty!” the left hand remarked with amusement.

Though the extremely lavish furnishings remained exactly as they had been, the titanic coffin that was, in a manner of speaking, a womb for the count had unexpectedly vanished.

“This is big news. A case of a Noble being abducted—and a major one at that!”

“Did you mention someone named Kima?” D asked, a strange glint in his eye. After emerging from the subterranean lake, Sue and the left hand had filled him in on the situation.

“Yeah. Apparently he travels through space warps. And it looks like he can also move others through them at will. Where the hell did ol’ Braujou get himself hijacked to? This is serious trouble.”

Turning his gaze to the window, D said, “Maybe not.”

“What?”

This time, not only the left hand looked surprised, but Sue did as well.

“We might still be in time. Let’s go.”

Sue shot a glance at the left hand, but it was already headed for the door, along with the rest of D. Did D mean to suggest he knew the whereabouts of the fearsome foe who’d abducted the count, coffin and all? If so, then this gorgeous young man was the one who was *really* to be feared.

It was a very clear day. The sun was bright and hot. About three miles from the car there was an expanse of boulders, and in their center was an especially high pile of stone—at the summit of which rested an enormous coffin. It was over fifteen feet long. Furthermore, there was a figure in a long crimson robe sitting on its lid. Kima.

"Well now, count. The end has come at last," he said, a hoarse voice flowing from him. "Your end, that is. Even inside this, you must be able to see out. You might even know where we are—the closest place to the sun!"

"You said you're Kima, didn't you," said a voice from the coffin. "This is a strange place you've brought me. Warping space has been accomplished through scientific means, but there haven't been many cases of individuals with that ability. Who the hell are you?"

"Someone close to the grand duke," Kima replied, looking up at the heavens. "Next, I'm going to move just your coffin. Even you, the great Count Braujou, will be hard pressed to survive out in broad daylight. You would do well to prepare to meet your maker."

"You think someone like you could manage that?"

"Have you forgotten how I had no problem bringing you here from your car? Now you'll see just what I can do."

Kima put his right hand against the coffin. It was a grave gesture that called to mind some kind of solemn religious ceremony. A second passed, then two—the entire coffin grew indistinct, as if it were in a fog; it shook, and then the massive form within it became clearly visible. The figure began to tremble a bit. It was a bizarre quaking as if he were having a nightmare, or else concentrating to an extreme degree. And then the outline of the coffin, which had become a mist, once again regained its shape and solidity. The figure was back within it as well.

"You son of a bitch!" Kima shouted, and he also trembled from head to toe.

The coffin that had just regained its shape lost it once more. Once it vanished, the count sleeping within it would be exposed to the sunlight and rot away horribly. But it stopped disappearing. Again it returned to its old shape—then faded away.

"I win," the sweat-covered Kima whispered.

Now reduced to a pale shadow, the figure in the coffin let out a deep groan as he covered his face. Kima's malicious grin grew particularly broad. A single needle had just penetrated him through the top of the head and back out at the bridge of his nose. Before even loosing a cry of agony, Kima grabbed hold of the needle. The needle

disappeared, leaving only the wound. A tiny bead of blood rose from it, but then even that vanished.

"You were the only one who ever moved through space warps, weren't you?"

Kima turned to where the voice had come from behind him. His mouth fell open, declaring his incredible shock.

"Ah!" Kima gasped, and then after a while, he groaned, "You're . . . Milord . . . you . . . are . . ."

In the end, his voice just died.

Did this fiend know D? Apparently D was also familiar with him. And that was obviously why he'd appeared on this summit so suddenly for reasons unknown.

"Do you remember me?" D asked.

"How could I . . . ever forget? You . . . milord . . . But you . . . couldn't possibly . . ."

"He looks like his heart's about to jump out of his throat," said a voice from D's left hand, which hung easily by his side. It was impressed. And stunned.

"Kima, I have a message for your present master. Tell him I'll see him soon."

The crimson figure trembled. "Then . . . you intend . . . to let me live? It can't be . . ."

"Go!"

At this command, Kima's body grew smoky and dim. A silvery flash ran through it at an angle, and there was a sharp *ching!*

Releasing the hilt of the sword he'd returned to its scabbard, D went over to the enormous coffin.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course," said the count. "There was no need for you to come out here and interfere. I could've skewered the likes of that assassin."

Saying nothing, D turned to walk away.

"Wait," the count called out in a slightly agitated manner. "Do you intend to just leave me here?"

"Can you move it yourself?" D asked as he headed down the slope.

"Regrettably, this coffin isn't equipped with a means of transport."

"Then you'll just have to wait there until the sun goes down."

"And you don't plan on doing anything to help me?"

"I'm in a hurry."

D went down the mound of stone. After all signs of him and his footsteps had faded, a voice from the coffin grumbled, "That savage. But to make someone like that, a freak who can warp space and take control of my computer, take flight without offering any resistance at all is really something. He's a true monster. A pair of monsters they

are . . . and they seem to know each other. What in the world is he?"

D had stopped the car at the foot of the rocky mountain. He'd also given Sue strict orders not to venture outside. But there was no sign of her anywhere.

"What the hell is all this?" the Hunter's left hand said with disgust, and rightfully so. They suspected Kima, but anyone that afraid of D didn't seem likely to come back there.

"Will the computer take instructions from Sue?" D asked.

"No, sir."

"Let's check," D said, placing his left hand on top of the computer's central control unit.

It was about two seconds later that the left hand announced that the girl actually hadn't given any orders. Still against the machine, it continued, "That means someone other than Kima can give the computer commands."

"How about the cameras?" the Hunter inquired.

There was silence for a moment.

"Oh, they're working. Let's have a look at them."

Perhaps the left hand's power was greater when it was connected to D, because the device that should've been accessible only by the count replayed for them in the blink of an eye a holographic image of the figure who'd opened the car door and gone off with Sue.

"But that's . . ." the tiny mouth in the palm of the left hand began before dropping open in astonishment.

"Matt, where are we going?" Sue asked, but her brother just went deeper into the forest, never once letting go of her right hand. He seemed to want to get away from the count's vehicle, D, and everyone else as quickly as he could—and that clearly was the case, Sue decided, watching her brother with wide-open eyes. She knew the reason why.

Her brother had the look of a man possessed. His features were frozen, and he walked with a mechanical stride. Sue had automatically turned her gaze to his throat and found no mark from the Nobility's fangs there, but the girl could tell at first glance that Matthew was under a spell. That was why she hadn't opened the door. And yet, her brother had come in. Sue became certain of her fears. Still, the girl didn't really offer any resistance as she was pulled out of the car.

"It's too dangerous to stay here. Run off with me."

As Matthew whispered to her in a monotone, Sue listened sadly but came quickly to a decision. She wasn't scared even if her brother was possessed.

“Matt,” Sue called to him again, fighting him a bit.

Her brother halted with unexpected ease.

“Where are we going?” Sue asked in a gentle tone.

“To the grand duke.”

Though she understood what Matthew said when he looked back at her, it inspired no terror. It was just as she’d thought. And, if Matthew was also as she imagined . . .

“Mr. D will be coming after us soon.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Matthew said with a nod. “That’s why I’m taking you to this special machine. I was able to come back here thanks to a person who’s got a similar power. He built it to do the same thing a long, long time ago, and it’s buried near here. Originally it was thousands of miles away, but the machine malfunctioned and wound up transporting itself here.”

“And you’ll use it to send me to that Noble?”

“That’s the plan,” Matthew replied, slapping his hands together loudly. “The grand duke’s a great man. He has power enough to rule the whole world. When he was exiled out among the stars, he took his whole domain with him in his ship. That’s why now, he lives in a wonderful kingdom just like he used to. We were wrong. We shouldn’t fight the fate that great man has given us. If he says he wants our heads, we should stick out our necks. If he desires our blood—”

“Quit it!” Sue cried out, her voice quavering.

Matthew pointed straight ahead, saying, “The person who changed me was named Kima. Kima said he has the power to see his own fate. That’s probably why he told me where to find the warp transporter. It’s over there, Sue.”

From a heavy stand of trees and bushes, a number of objects that appeared to be stone statues fifteen to twenty feet tall poked out at odd angles.

“He told me how to use it. Let’s go to the land of the grand duke.”

Matthew turned around. She didn’t mind his bloodshot eyes, and she could even accept the way he foamed at the mouth. But his expression . . . As he stared at her with a look on his face that said he’d completely given himself over to madness, she didn’t recognize him anymore.

He’s not my brother. These words pounded in Sue’s chest as she brought her right hand around to the back of her belt. Stuck through it was a rough tree branch—a stake that Sue had personally honed to a sharp point. As she threw herself toward Matthew’s chest, she braced the stake by her hip. Matthew’s shudders were transmitted through every inch of Sue’s body. Though she let go of the stake right away, her fingers were caught up in the sensation and she couldn’t free them easily.

“Matt,” Sue said, her eyes full of tears.

She’d stabbed her own brother. That was an unforgivable act, but it wasn’t on account of this that Sue shed these tears. She understood now why she hated Matthew, and it didn’t bother her. Her brother had tried to violate her—and that horrifying fact dissolved any bond of kinship they might’ve had. Just as Matthew had sought to defile her with a passion, so Sue had been all too happy to drive that wooden stake into her brother’s chest.

“Sue . . .”

She heard him say her name into her ear. Coming together, the two of them stood as if in an embrace.

“Matt . . . I’m sorry,” Sue said, a fiery tear coursing down her cheek.

“So you . . . had to get back at me . . . did you?”

“What?”

“I remember now, Sue . . . Before I came here . . . I’d just killed you.”

“Matt?” Sue wanted to look at her brother’s face, but she couldn’t move. Matthew’s arms held her tight, as if she were a treasure.

“So that would make this . . . your revenge . . . You’re . . . not Sue.”

His sister didn’t know what to say to that.

The hands that held her tight gradually slid up her back and to her shoulders.

“And if you’re not Sue . . . then there was no point . . . in bringing you with me.”

From her shoulders, he went for her neck. Sue gasped as her breath was choked from her. Her field of view was promptly locked in darkness.

The light returned. Her head seemed about to split, but all the blackness that filled it retreated. Oxygen suddenly flowed back into her lungs, and Sue coughed violently as she fell back on the ground.

“Let go of me,” she heard Matthew say. She sensed fighting nearby.

A figure in a white dress had caught hold of both Matthew’s wrists from behind and was trying to pin him down. Over his shoulder, a lovely face was visible. And she also noticed Sue. Her beautiful features made an alluring grin.

“Oh, you remember me, do you?”

Sue nodded.

The fiendish diva Callas. This was the same siren who’d taken D’s arrow through the throat, and now her complexion was a good deal paler as she broke into a satisfied smile.

INTO THE LAND OF THE FIEND

I

Not knowing what to do or say, Sue simply watched as the battle ended. Perhaps piqued by the obstinately struggling Matthew, Callas brought away her right hand, and then, as Matthew tried to twist around and slip free of her other hand, she delivered a vicious knee to his solar plexus. Violence of this sort was unexpected from such a lithe beauty, but she sent Matthew tumbling forward with an explosion of breath. Carrying Matthew's body easily over one shoulder, Callas walked over to Sue with powerful strides. Bending over, she grabbed Sue by the shoulder. A numbing pain struck the girl all the way to the bone. Sue bent backward.

Seeing Sue get to her feet, Callas grinned, until she realized Sue's second stake had pierced her abdomen. Staggering, Callas stared at the girl. Her eyes burned with a shadowy fire.

Frightened in her heart of hearts, Sue turned and ran right back the way she'd come.

She got the feeling she could hear pursuing footsteps behind her. No matter how fast or how far she ran, the sound stayed with her. Time and again she nearly fell from fatigue and shortness of breath, and finally she *did* tumble forward. But her body stopped halfway to the ground. A powerful arm and broad chest had caught her.

Looking up at her savior's face with eyes near death, Sue groaned, "D!"

And with that she fainted.

A chill spread through the girl from her forehead, and she quickly awakened.

Taking his left hand from her brow, D inquired, "What happened?"

"My brother was possessed by this person named Kima, and he led me away. I stabbed him. And then Callas came . . ."

She didn't mention that her brother had nearly strangled her to death.

Just as she finished talking, D stuck his left hand out in front of himself. There was a flash of light. Sheathing his sword again, D used his right hand to take hold of his left, which came off cleanly at the wrist.

"You're a slave driver," the Hunter's left hand cursed as it was set down at Sue's feet.

"It'll take you back," was all D told the girl before running off in the direction from which she'd come.

Soon after the girl and the hand returned to the car, D came back as well. He was alone.

"What about my brother?" Sue asked.

No matter what happened, the gorgeous young man's demeanor remained as icy as ever. It was impossible for anyone else to guess what he would do or what he might accomplish.

"He wasn't there."

"What?"

"There was no sign of him. But there were traces of a spatial warp."

"Oh! That would have to be—" Sue began, going on to explain the situation in detail.

"So, they were transported, machine and all? Where'd they go?" the left hand murmured.

"There's only one place they could be," D replied.

"Yeah, Valcua's land. What'll we do?"

"I entered a contract to protect these children. We're going into Valcua's domain."

"How about the girl?"

"She'll accompany us."

"Wouldn't she be better off at the fortress?"

"I injured Kima, but he's not dead. You think the fortress could stop him?"

"You'd just have to beef up the defensive systems."

"That'd take too long. Keep in mind that every second might count in rescuing Matthew from his fate."

"So, you plan to just head out there? Strike out into Valcua's domain?"

The left hand must've posed that question without thinking. It quickly fell silent.

D turned to Sue. Although he hadn't asked her anything, she grew flustered. He stared at her with those bottomless dark eyes. Getting the feeling he peered into the very depths of her mind, Sue became frightened.

"You have some bruising on your throat. In the shape of a man's fingers," D said. "Will you go with us?"

A terrifying spectacle came back to her. The expression her brother had worn as he squeezed her neck. Closing her eyes, Sue said, "I never wanna see that again. That face!"

She put her hands over her eyes. And she remained like that for a few seconds. Then she took her hands away, looked up, and said, "But I stabbed my brother. I suppose that makes us even. Bring me along with you."

“Your brother is a real mess—but it’s decided, then,” the left hand remarked, sounding weary.

“She’s shown great courage,” Count Braujou said, having held his peace until now. There was a ring of admiration to his words.

For the next five days, the group traveled nonstop. There was no sign of Seurat, Callas, or even the newest assassin, Kima, but of course nothing further was seen of Matthew, either.

“We are entering the northern Frontier sectors,” the lovely female voice informed them on the evening of the sixth day.

As he gazed at the panoramic hologram projected in the room, the count was the first to say, “This is quite a sight.”

After that, he fell silent.

No trace remained of the northern Frontier the world had known. What lay there was a flat black plain utterly devoid of grass and trees. In the twilight, the surface of the plain had a metallic gleam, and it also had an unearthly air that seemed to chill the very winds that blew across it. While looking out toward the horizon where not a glimpse, not a trace of any living creature could be seen, a person might feel a tremendous despair and sensation of loss and would probably collapse on the spot.

Lightning flashed in the distance.

“Before the northern Frontier came to be as we know it, it used to be Valcua’s kingdom, didn’t it?” the left hand said.

“That’s right,” Braujou replied. He was seated in an enormous chair. Sitting beside him on a chair intended for guests was Sue. D remained standing.

“He completely remodeled the northern Frontier,” the count continued. “After he was exiled, this territory was a wasteland for as far as the eye could see. Rumor had it he’d picked up his kingdom and put it in his pocket. And it looks like that was indeed the case.”

“Do you know what the lay of the land was five thousand years ago?” D inquired.

The count thumped his chest. A sound like a gong being struck echoed through the room, causing Sue to stiffen. “Leave it to me. My mind hasn’t gone on me. I’ve also fed the maps into my computer.”

“Where should we enter?”

“It doesn’t make any difference. The whole territory is rigged with sensors. Whether Valcua considered someone an ally or a foe determined whether or not they could enter. And we’ve probably long since come under his scrutiny. I believe he’s telling us we can come at him from any direction, whenever we like.”

“I’m surprised you made it in five thousand years ago,” the left hand said.

The answer to that was simple.

"The Sacred Ancestor gave us a device to negate the sensors. Also, merchants and travelers were able to pass through them."

It was because of this that Sue's ancestor had met up with the three Nobles who were traveling to confront Valcua.

"In that case—a frontal assault it is, eh?" the left hand said, summarizing their plight nicely. "But before we do that, we might wanna ask that group hanging around up there what their situation is. If I'm not mistaken, that'd be a survey party from the Capital."

By the border between dirt and steel were assembled wagons, cars, and other transports. Beside them stood sleeping quarters that resembled bisected cylinders. In the center a group of people had gathered, and they were staring in the direction of the count's car. The first ones to come out weren't really armed, but the ones who now bounded from the sleeping quarters carried automatic rifles, flamethrowers, and laser pistols. After all, an unknown vehicle was approaching.

A man stepped forward, his laser pistol leveled. A crimson beam of light angled down from his weapon, sinking into the dirt in front of the car. A section of ground a foot in diameter melted, sending vapor into the air.

"The impudence," the count chuckled.

Sue turned to look at him and said, "Please, don't." For she'd sensed his urge to retaliate.

"Stop the car," D said as he headed for the door.

Looking at the Hunter out of the corner of his eye, the count remarked sullenly, "Am I supposed to answer to your every command now?"

"Lives depend on it—yours, in particular," D replied, at which the Nobleman's displeasure became even more apparent.

"Halt," Braujou ordered.

The instant they saw the young man in black appear, a kind of unvoiced shock rolled through the group of men like a wave. His good looks left them amazed, while his unearthly air numbed them to the bone.

"Is this a survey party?" D asked.

The men were exchanging glances when a tall and imposing figure appeared from one of the sleeping quarters, advancing to the front of the group with quick strides.

"We're the second survey party sent out here by the Capital. I'm the leader—Otto's the name."

"I'm D."

This time, it was an intense shock wave that passed through the men.

“You . . . you’re D?” Otto asked, his fearless visage tinged with wonder and excitement. “Even back in the Capital we’ve heard there’s a Hunter so good, mere money hardly seems payment enough. Who ever thought we’d run into you out here . . .”

Eyeing the car behind D, he asked, “That your ride?”

The young man before him and the car didn’t seem to jibe.

“Yes, for convenience’s sake,” D replied. Apparently he’d taken a liking to Otto.

Perhaps understanding as much, the survey-party leader grinned, saying, “Well, if there are Nobles to be slain, this job certainly calls for a Vampire Hunter. A bunch of folks have already set out and not made it back, but the man called D, now that’s—”

“You said you were the second survey party, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. The first one left a month back, but that was the last anyone heard of ’em. We got here two days ago and have been establishing our base camp, but tomorrow, we’ll finally set off.”

“Hey, if it’s all right with you, why don’t you go with us?” a heavily bearded character called out to D. “You Vampire Hunters know all about how the Nobles live. Having you along would sure be a lot of help—wouldn’t it?”

The men to whom he directed that appeal nodded in unison.

“Knock it off. You’re an embarrassment,” Otto yelled at the man. “He’s got his own job to do. And we’d just be in his way. Of course, he’d also be in ours.”

The leader was grinning at D again when a voice called out, “The scout’s back!”

A number of them ran to see. Otto looked in their direction, then turned back to D and said, “This’ll have to wait until later. The least we can do is swap intel.”

Having said this, he turned and left.

“Now there’s a man among men,” the left hand remarked, sounding both impressed and mocking.

Of course, there was no reply.

II

After seeing the condition of the scout, Otto had to catch his breath. One of the man’s arms had been torn off at the shoulder, but due to the sterile blood-stanching bandages that he’d applied to it—most likely while fleeing—he’d somehow managed to keep himself alive. Otto estimated that he wouldn’t last another five minutes. His wounds were so grave, it was a miracle he’d even made it back.

“Are you the only one left?” one of the men asked. The reconnaissance party had set out with five men.

The man nodded. He and the men surrounding him had ghastly looks on their faces.

A doctor raced over to examine his wounds, and then walked away from the scout, shaking his head.

"What happened?"

The scout understood Otto's question, but no voice came out. His ashen lips trembled. The light was swiftly fading from his bulging eyes.

"It's no use, I guess," Otto said, about to close the man's eyes—as was often done to send off the dead—but just then a black figure cut across his field of view.

Seeing the gorgeous youth place his left hand against the dying man's brow, the men looked at each other. Some of them even intoned spells. D's great beauty and unearthly air made everything he did seem wondrous.

The light returned to the scout's eyes. Cries of astonishment rang out, and the men focused on their compatriot, who'd seemingly returned from the dead.

"Can you hear me, Bolan? It's me—Otto. How about the others? What happened?"

As Otto peered down at him, the man grabbed his shoulder with an emaciated hand. Otto grimaced. The man had ferocious strength.

"They all got killed . . . Run for it . . . They're . . . coming . . . after me!"

Some of the men shot startled glances out over the black plain, but a deep blue darkness already covered the land, and they could see nothing.

"What do you mean by *they*?" asked another man.

"Glowing cylinders . . . with dozens of arms . . . They hoisted up the others . . . then injected 'em with something . . . and they dropped like flies . . ."

That was when it happened. Someone close to the plain shouted, "Something's coming, and it's glowing!"

For a second, the men stared at the scout's face, and then they got to their feet.

"They're coming . . . Run for it . . . There's no use . . . fighting them."

Bolan drew a deep breath, his body shuddered badly, and then he gave up the ghost.

Ignoring the noisy group around him, D stood up.

Bowing his head to the deceased, Otto said, "Thanks to you, D, we know what's headed this way ain't friendly. You have our thanks. Now I'm asking you to stand back."

"Captain, why don't we have him help us?" asked a man with belt

upon belt of machine-gun ammo hanging around his neck, tossing his chin in D's direction.

"He's a private citizen. We take care of ourselves. Don't go looking to others to do your work for you."

"Yeah, but—"

"Enough yapping. Reinforce that barricade. Don't let anything get within a hundred yards of us."

Giving D a slap on the shoulder and bidding him farewell, Otto dashed off.

The doctor grabbed the corpse by the arm and dragged it away.

"You plan on just sitting back?" the left hand inquired.

"Those were his instructions."

"That's right. But that Otto guy, he's not too bad, for a human. It'd be a shame for him to die for nothing, that's—gaaah!"

Clenching his fist tightly, D began walking back to the car that sat blackly in the darkness.

Fortunately, the glowing points' approach was slow and meandering. Five minutes after spotting them, the survey party had finished setting up triple barricades of reinforced plastic and lightweight alloy shields across the front of the camp, and they were positioned for defensive action.

"Two hundred yards to contact," a survey member peering through an infrared scope called out.

"At one hundred yards, open fire. And take real good aim."

Not even waiting for Otto's instructions, the men had already put the enemy in their rifle sights, and pale blue flames licked from nozzles of flamethrowers already filthy from oily smoke.

The glowing points had given way to their true shape. They were steadily approaching. Advancing smoothly, as if caution had been thrown to the wind, they sent unsettling ripples through the hearts of the defenders.

"One hundred yards!" the man with the scope called out, and simultaneously fiery streaks stained the twilight with red. Sparks flew where the men's rounds hit the cylindrical bodies. The enemy's advance was unaffected—each and every bullet slid right off its target.

"Fifty yards! Forty!"

The instant the lookout informed them the enemy had reached the thirty-yard mark, two plumes of fire assailed their foes. The flamethrowers had been biding their time. Right on target, the flames spread around the points they struck, but then quickly slid off. The outer skin of these cylindrical foes had been specially treated to shed oil just as easily as water.

The men heard the announcement for twenty yards. A massive

explosion staggered the cylinders. Blasts in rapid succession enveloped their foes in smoke and flames. It was their final weapon—grenade launchers.

From the depths of that black smoke, silvery bodies came into view. They quickly peeled through the barricades, using their tentacles to tear them to pieces. At first appearing only a dozen feet long, they'd stretched to over sixty feet in length.

"Fall back. Make a run for it!"

Without even waiting for Otto to give his command, the men began to flee. One of the cylinders that had dismantled the barricade sent tentacles wriggling after them like serpents. Two men were captured. Their cries were like the gasps of dying men. Swiftly raising the men thirty feet off the ground, the cylinder used another tentacle to drive a needle into the base of each man's neck.

"Son of a bitch!" Otto shouted when the pair of corpses had been discarded at his feet, and he drew the saber from his hip. Standing still, he landed a blow on the body of the approaching cylinder. All the force he'd put behind it was reflected right back at him, numbing him from the wrist to the shoulder.

A tentacle coiled around the leader's torso. In agony and suffocating, like he was caught in a steel ring, Otto started to black out. His face instantly turned deep purple, and tremors raced through every inch of him. As he struggled, another tentacle approached the nape of his neck. The needle at the end of it glowed mysteriously in the fire of the flamethrowers.

The cylinder that held Otto began to slide off at an angle. Severed electrical systems gave off pale-blue waves of electromagnetism.

Grabbed by the collar and pulled free, Otto revived. A young man of unearthly beauty was looking down at him. Forgetting his fear, forgetting even the pain in his waist, all he could do was stare in amazement.

"Can you move?" D asked him.

Returning to his senses, he replied, "Yeah, I'll manage." He still hadn't worked free of that feeling of intoxication.

"Go."

Thrown back with tremendous force, Otto hit the back of his head against the ground. Madly scrambling to his feet, he turned and looked.

Apparently the cylinders recognized D as their new opponent. Aside from a few that continued to pursue the men, the rest charged in unison at the black-garbed vision of beauty.

Otto stared, shocked. The things had been cut apart! Every time the blade in D's right hand flashed out, the cylinders that were impervious to bullets and flames were bisected with laughable ease,

sending up fountains of blue sparks from where they fell on the ground. Each and every tentacle that stretched out to capture D was left severed.

"Behind you!" someone shouted.

The cylinders pursuing the men had circled around behind D. Before the figure in black could leap with lightning speed, the tip of an enormous spear skewered two of the enemy, which were sent flying into the air. The cylinders disappeared into the sky, and a pair of blue flashes a good hundred yards off to the right vanished.

No cheers rang out. The men had seen something they were never meant to see: a Nobleman more than twelve feet tall.

"I suppose I needn't have done that," Count Braujou said. He'd seen D execute a backflip that took him clear of the cylinders even before the Nobleman's long spear had pierced them.

The spear in the count's right hand whistled through the wind as he swung it. The men around him cried out and cowered. The Noble hadn't just been flexing his muscles. His actions had clearly been a threat.

"It . . . it's a Noble!" someone stammered, and that was like a signal to open the floodgates.

"He's fucking huge!"

"He's a freak . . ."

The voices of all were faint, weak, tremulous.

A basic fear of the Nobility had been branded into the human subconscious. Some said this was a result of an "education" the Nobility had given the human race at a genetic level more than ten thousand years earlier, but all records from that time had been destroyed, leaving no way to confirm this. Despite the scientific edge the Nobility possessed, the fact that in ten long millennia the human race had showed no hint of rebellion could conceivably be linked to that fear. And since the Nobility also knew this, it stood to reason they would become rather arrogant. As he peered down at the humans from a height of twelve feet, Count Braujou's eyes held a distinct gleam of scorn. But since the survey party would've been annihilated if he and D hadn't been there, that was understandable.

"Have you heard all they have to say, D?" Braujou said, his voice making the people cringe again as it rained down from on high. It was like the angry peals of a thunder god.

"I'm done," D replied, sheathing his sword.

"Do we have any reason to remain here?"

"No."

"Then let's go. Valcua has already taken the boy hostage and laid plans to annihilate us. It makes no difference when we set off, but we don't have time to dawdle here."

The count broke off there, and he wore an expression of mild surprise as he surveyed his surroundings.

A thirst for blood hung in the air. Every member of the survey party had a weapon trained on the count. The men were quaking audibly, and the barrels of their weapons seemed to release a dense lust for killing that would turn into an inferno. The humans had suddenly exhibited the other reaction Nobles inspired in them—the urge to destroy them.

D stepped between them. "He saved your crew," the Hunter said to Otto.

Otto had a four-barreled firearm pointed at the count. "Yeah. And we thank him for that," he replied, giving D a sideward glance. Hatred burned in his eyes. And even when those same eyes were emblazoned with the youth's beauty, this abhorrence never waned. "We're grateful to you, too. But there ain't a man among us who hasn't lost kin on account of the Nobility. The battle to clean out the Capital went on for twenty damned years."

"So, hating others is one of life's little pleasures?" a hoarse voice commented.

For a moment, Otto's eyes were riveted to D's left hip. Returning his gaze to the Hunter, he said, "You—you're a dhampir, right? That being the case, do you understand how the feelings run on both sides? Or maybe you don't know how either side feels? Well, if you intend to intervene here, I'm afraid we can't let you do whatever suits you at the moment. Back off. Otherwise, you'll have to call on your skill with that sword to kill us."

"You can't slay him. Do you intend to die before you can even do your job?"

"That don't bother us none."

The men to either side of Otto turned the barrels of their firearms and rivet guns on D.

"My kid died after my wife ripped his head off. She'd been bitten by a Noble the night before."

"My family was used as game when the Nobles had a human hunt. My dad, my wife, and both my daughters were run down by a Noble's carriage and squashed flat. I had to go claim the bodies. Each of 'em had been run over *twice*."

"You're a dhampir, right? Then get that sword of yours out. And put it to use against one side or the other. If possible, we'd like it to be against us. Because we'd just love to blow away a bastard with Noble blood in him."

As madness eddied in their gazes, they reflected a pair of dark eyes that were cold and deep.

"D, don't move," the count said. "You don't have to do a thing

here. But I don't want you to hold this against me later. The human in you, that is."

Stillness descended. Every sight and sound had been absorbed by the madness of these two species. And it was all a million miles from D—both the human loathing and the Noble ire. He belonged to neither group. Would his sword be drawn, or would it remain in its scabbard? And if it did flash out . . . whom would it be used against?

In the early evening, the lust for blood congealed, seeking death.

III

"Please, wait!" an unexpected voice called out, pushing back the darkness and the will to kill.

The eyes of the men and the count—and even D—turned in unison toward the Nobleman's car to behold the lithe figure that stood by its door. Sue ran forward, coming close enough that the men could make out her features. Unable to stand this volatile situation, the courageous girl had left the car. But how had she managed that? The vehicle's main computer had been ordered not to let her leave under any circumstances.

Taking a long look at D, the count grinned wryly. The Hunter's left hand was missing—that explained how Sue had managed to leave the car.

"Please, stop this fighting. These people are here to protect me."

First, a wind of bewilderment seemed to blow through the ranks of the men, but it soon became one of surprise.

"Protect you? A Noble protecting a human being?"

"Where are you from, girl?"

"Forget that—are you even human? Show us some proof."

"Yeah, good point!"

Shock and doubt and anger became a rumble that crashed down on every inch of Sue. The storm of voices was almost like a physical blow, but Sue stood still and took it without moving a muscle. From the moment she'd left the car, she was prepared for whatever might come.

Their grumbling died down. Otto had stepped to the fore. Looking first up at the count, then down at Sue, he asked in a hard tone, "Girl —are you human?"

"Yes."

"Where's your village? And what's your name?"

After Sue had answered him, he continued, "It's hard to believe you're traveling with a Noble and remain unharmed. He hasn't done anything to you, you say?"

"That's right." Sue puffed up her chest. This was where she had to

do her best. “The count hasn’t done anything. He’s merely come here to keep me safe, and to rescue my brother.”

“You got any way of proving nothing’s happened to you?” one of the men shouted out in a quavering voice.

Otto’s expression changed. There was only one way to prove that nothing had happened while she was traveling with the Noble—and that she hadn’t been bitten. They needed to be shown there were no marks on her from the kiss of the Nobility. And to do that . . .

“Yes, I do,” Sue immediately replied.

The men were shaken once more.

“Uh, miss,” Otto started to say to her, but before he could finish, Sue was already reaching for the buttons on her blouse. Without hesitation, the girl shed every stitch of clothing there in the twilight.

Turning toward the men, she said, “You can check all you want.”

The boldness of this girl, willing to completely sacrifice herself, left the men speechless. However, as Sue faced straight ahead, her expression stiffened, and tears rose in her eyes. Her lips were pursed tightly, and she bit down on them so hard she nearly drew blood. And her body trembled with surpassing embarrassment. She was a fourteen-year-old girl. There was no reason why this wouldn’t bother her.

A strange silence enveloped the group.

“Okay, I’m gonna look her over!”

“Me, too!”

“Me, three!”

The three men who’d volunteered stepped forward.

“Sure you want to do that?”

As biting cold as a winter’s frost, the words made the trio halt. At that instant, they were paralyzed. D said no more. However, the men knew with complete certainty the fate that would await them should they move one more step from where they were. He wouldn’t let them lay a finger on the girl. Their eyes wouldn’t seek the pale and naked flesh—a single remark from the young man in black had forbidden it.

“Knock it off already!” Otto shouted, his words dissolving this new moment of impending death. “All three of you, get back over there. I’m sorry, missy. You did us a good turn and almost got nothing but trouble in return. I truly apologize.”

On seeing the man bow deeply to her, Sue crouched down where she was. She felt relieved.

Something like a black shadow fell across Sue, enveloping her naked form and then moving away. Blue fabric covered Sue’s body, as if to protect her. Having draped an enormous handkerchief over her, the count’s hand had already risen back toward the sky.

D started walking. As he went over to Sue without looking at

either Otto or his survey party, the weird aura that gushed from him and the way he looked like some heavenly sculpture kept everyone paralyzed.

"Let's go," D said.

Sue stood, wiped away her tears, and then leaned against D's chest. Matthew wasn't there anymore. But she quickly pulled away again. The girl knew he wasn't the kind of person who'd let her stay there for long.

Not making a sound, the count led the way, as if to protect Sue. D brought up the rear.

"That went pretty well," the hoarse voice said. At some point, D's left hand had returned to its original position. "No one's blood got spilled. You cut me off so I could operate independently, but if she hadn't done what she did, you probably would've ended up killing the lot of them to protect the count. A pity what the girl had to go through—gaaah!"

As D's fist clenched tight, it trembled faintly. The tremendous force left his knuckles white.

"Gaaah . . . you . . . you're still . . . too soft . . . Were you touched . . . by her admirable spirit . . . or something? Geeeeh!"

The voice died out. Something red began to trickle from between D's fingers.

When the door opened, the trio was greeted by a face they hadn't seen for a while.

"You did quite well for a human girl," said a figure of alluring beauty in a lovely white dress—none other than Duchess Miranda.

"Real nice job this car's doing," the left hand said loudly enough for the count to hear. It was mocking him for the way the duchess had been able to enter it as she wished.

Making an expression of undisguised bitterness, the count inquired bluntly, "Where have you been and what've you been doing?"

They hadn't seen her since they'd been sucked into the extradimensional space created by Sigma back in Galleon Valley.

"Here and there, doing this and that," the Noblewoman replied, placing her hand over her mouth and laughing in a gesture that was positively enchanting. Her delicate hand was pale, while her lips were red as blood.

Batting her lengthy eyelashes, she looked at Sue and murmured, "You're such a credit; it's a pity the same can't be said for your brother."

"You've *seen* him?" Sue shouted, the words shooting from her like an explosion.

"Yes—I rescued him. And in the process I took care of one of the assassins—someone called Courbet."

"My brother—where is he?"

"Well, the fact of the matter is—"

From the explanation the duchess gave, it became clear that her encounter with Matthew had come before Sue had stabbed her brother.

"Then we really have no choice but to go, I guess," the hoarse voice remarked.

"We'll set off right away," the count said with a nod, and then he turned to Miranda. "You'll be joining us, won't you?" From his tone, that was hardly what he desired.

"No. I'll be getting out here. I have some unfinished business."

"But our job is—"

"I'll catch up with you soon enough. After I lost my husband, I realized that being alone suited my disposition. Basking in the moonlight as I please, enjoying the scent of moonlight grass and dark narcissus as I flit through the world of night—that's the life for me."

"*The life for me*? Don't you mean *the death for me*?"

The Noblewoman stared in the direction of the hoarse little voice, and then turned toward Sue again, her eyes and expression strangely calm.

"I like individuals of mettle. I had thought humans had none, but seeing you has changed my mind. It would seem we're defending someone worthy of my efforts."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Sue countered, but she smiled.

D and the count exchanged glances.

"I think she's lost her mind," Braujou muttered.

Up until that point, everything had been fine, but then Miranda suggested, "Will you not forget about your older brother and come join my clan?"

"Enough of that!" the count said, forced to intervene.

"That's regrettable. She would make a superb Noble." And saying that, Miranda backed away, stopping before the door to add, "Until we meet again."

Having said this, she became a mass of mist that slipped out a gap in the door so small even bacteria couldn't get through.

"That woman's as self-centered as always." Heaving a sigh, the count issued an order toward the ceiling, saying, "Get underway!"

"Hey! They're on the move!"

"Goddamned monsters. Where do they think they're going?"

"At any rate, that's one less headache for us!"

Watched by the survey-party members, each voicing his feeling,

the car advanced across the darkness-shrouded plain without a sound from its engine, and soon it could be seen no more.

"I think you should've asked them what'll be waiting for us out there, captain."

There was a clap on his shoulder, and turning, he found the doctor. The cries of the wounded that surrounded him made Otto look around reproachfully.

Taking the pipe from his mouth, the doctor replied, "It's not all that bad. Three are seriously wounded—all the rest just have cuts and scrapes. With this new medicine that was discovered in some of the Nobility's ruins, everyone should be fit as a fiddle by tomorrow morning."

"I've heard about that stuff," Otto said as he ran his eyes over his surroundings and felt for the gun on his hip. "Sounds like it has the power to make the cells of any living creature regenerate. Is it basically the source of immortality?"

"Something like it, I suppose. Except when humans use it, it'll only work the first two times. So we can't make like the Nobility." Rubbing his balding pate, the doctor blew out purplish pipe smoke.

"But if the Nobility are ageless and indestructible, why'd they ever make something like that, Doc? They're so fit; it's not like they'd ever need it."

At this perfectly natural question from Otto, the doctor furrowed his brow and scratched at his head. "Now, this is just a rumor, but it's one I think you might recall having heard before. They say the legendary king of the Nobility, the one they call their Sacred Ancestor, was obsessed with certain accursed experiments."

It felt as if the air around them had suddenly grown colder, and Otto trembled.

Just then, an odd thing occurred in their camp. Forty to fifty feet from where Otto and the doctor were talking, the other party members were busy repairing the barricades and cleaning their guns. At the very back a group of five men were assembling a spotlight tower when a pale woman suddenly appeared behind them. And when she pressed her ruby-red lips against the nape of the nearest man's neck, he collapsed on the spot without uttering a word. Yet the others, including a man who was less than a foot from him, didn't notice. The woman slipped up to a second man working in silence and did the same thing to him. The fifth man fell without any of them ever noticing the Noblewoman, and none of the other party members even looked in their direction.

Not seeming hurried at all, the woman proceeded with an elegant gait to where one party member was welding supports to the end of a barricade, and then moved on to the man beside him. From time to

time, a member of the group looked in her direction, but she probably had the ability to perceive when that would happen, because she always concealed herself behind her victims, and the darkness also aided her so that no one actually caught sight of her.

In this manner, the party members fell one after another, and the woman made her way over to Otto and the doctor. The topic of the Sacred Ancestor and his suspicious experiments was more than enough to keep the men occupied.

"That would mean the Sacred Ancestor really had that intent after all, but that's pretty hard to believe."

"I thought the same thing, but after information brought to the Board of Antiquities was analyzed, it seemed almost certain the rumors were true." Finally taking his hands away from his head, the doctor continued, "According to journals and other materials left by the Nobility, the Sacred Ancestor is a vampire so great the average Noble can't even begin to understand him. Perhaps his behavior was—*unexpected*."

Otto folded his arms, mulling this over, while ten feet behind him a party member who'd been coiling up a rope received the woman's kiss. Right beside him another man was engaged in the same task, but he didn't even look at her.

"Now this is another rumor," the doctor said, wagging his index finger. "It's said the Sacred Ancestor's accursed experiments took the lives of nearly a hundred million people, and it seems he only had one success."

"Oh, so that would be—" the captain began with a nod, but when he looked over to where the doctor should've been by his right side, the man wasn't there. There was no sign at all of his companion, as if the darkness had swallowed him whole.

"Hey, doc—where'd you go?" Otto called out, but even as he spoke, he noticed that something strange was going on. Looking around for someone to shout over to, he felt a chill run down his spine. There was no one there.

"Now this is odd . . ."

Clucking his tongue, Otto ran back to the sleeping quarters. Though born and raised in the Capital, he'd been doing surveys out on the Frontier for more than twenty years. He could recall several such cases—people vanishing one by one under the darkness of night. Many times it was the work of highly intelligent beasts or evil spirits, but in the majority of such cases it was said their compatriots took notice while it was going on. There was only one exception to that—when the night itself was targeting the humans. In other words, a Noble.

A stake gun rested beside his bed. It was the only weapon humans

had to fight the Nobility. Otto picked it up. And something grabbed his wrist–a pale hand that reached out from under the blanket. Pulling free with a cry of surprise, he pointed the stake gun at it. With a bang the high-density gas fuse in the bottom of the stake propelled it a thousand feet per second, driving it ruthlessly through the center of the blanket. The female hand disappeared, as if it'd never been there.

Otto looked at his right hand. He saw purple bruises where the fingers had gripped him. The limb was also horribly numb.

Shifting the weapon to his left hand, Otto ran out of the sleeping quarters. He got two steps before he froze in his tracks.

The scene was perfectly ordinary. Kenny was working on the auto cannon; Breck's eyes were gleaming as he inspected the ammo; Corey and Djavan, Law and Agrifass all hummed as they concentrated on repairing the barricades. And the doctor? He was right where he'd been earlier, rubbing his balding pate and smoking his pipe.

Otto thought he must have dreamed it. Then he looked at his right hand. The bruises remained distinct. His left hand lowered the stake gun. To his rear, the night wind coldly informed him, "Your kind was our food. And to think that now you turn a gun on a Noble."

When he whipped around for a look, a stark beauty stood before him. Even more than her white dress, it was her pale skin that glowed in the moonlight, and the moon that night was reflected in her vermilion lips. Instinctively, Otto leveled the gun—and the woman made a swipe with her right hand. A terrific force exploded against his fingertips and the gun, which weighed about seven pounds, was sent flying like a dry twig.

"It's a Noble!" he shouted, still staring at the woman as he backed away a few steps. "Blast her! Burn the shit out of her!"

"What kind of thing is that to say, Otto?" he heard the doctor remark. His voice resembled a woman's.

Otto didn't turn around. He knew all too well what had happened.

I'm the only one left.

"Well, say hello to our new master," Kenny said. But what had been Kenny now had the voice of a monster.

As a hand brushed his shoulder and elbow from behind, Otto shook free of it with a scream and moved forward. The woman was right in front of him.

"I am Duchess Miranda," she said. And then, as if granting him an audience, the pale Noblewoman slowly extended her right hand. Toward Otto's throat.

He covered his face with his hands.

DEATHTRAP

CHAPTER 7

I

The black ground spread as far as the eye could see. Occasionally lightning flashed in the distance, but that was the only life to be felt amidst this death. Sue felt relieved.

"It's just like the sea," the left hand said.

"What's the sea?" the girl inquired.

"Something really vast."

"Vast?"

"Yeah, and blue."

"Blue?"

"Ah, this is going nowhere. Just think of it as a massive lake," the count snorted pedantically from where he reclined on an enormous sofa.

"A big lake, you say?" Though Sue tried to form an image of what they were describing, all she came up with was a picture of a pond.

"That's right," the count said with a rare grin, adding, "Only it's salty."

"Why's that? I can't believe there's such a thing as salty-tasting water."

"Salted salmon live in it," the Noble stated.

"That's some kind of fish, is it?"

"Yes, and they grow to be about sixty miles long. That's why when they float at the surface for too long, people settle on them. They mistake them for islands. In less than a month a town's been built, and people start developing the area and running businesses."

"Would you knock that off?" the hoarse voice said. "He's just pulling your leg, missy."

"Really? You're terrible, count!" the girl exclaimed, pursing her lips.

The count looked down at her with no expression on his face, saying, "I see—it's just as he said."

More than the words, it was the tone that drew Sue's attention.

"He? Are you talking about my brother?"

Replying that he wasn't, the count got off the sofa. "Get some rest now. You're a human being. You must remember you were meant to live in the sunlight."

Once his gargantuan form had departed the living room, Sue remarked disappointedly, "I think I've offended the count."

"No, that's not it. Oddly enough, it looks like he's got some melancholy recollections."

"I wonder who he was talking about."

"Don't get mixed up in it," D said, his soft voice making the girl go stiff. "A life lived in the darkness of night might still be called a life. And after living ten millennia, one might have all sorts of memories. That includes memories that would vanish if they were exposed to the light of day."

"Is that so?" Sue said, looking down at the floor. When she looked up again, her voice was resolute. "I'm sure that's the case. After all, the Nobility have feelings just like us. They get happy and sad, angry and hurt. I suppose there's nothing strange about it at all. All this time I've been with the count, I never even noticed that."

"You've seen right through him. The Nobility are an odd lot. They hide in the bathroom to do all their laughing and crying. And they walk around with umbrellas, but never open them when it rains."

"Wow," Sue remarked, her eyes aglitter.

"Don't be so impressed. There's not a word of truth to that," D said, letting the air out of her.

"Well, I'll be!" Shooting an angry glance toward the left hand, Sue announced that she was going to bed and left the living room. She was smiling.

The bedroom she'd been given was a guest room right next door. Nobles the size of the count were few and far between, and the other accommodations were scaled to an ordinary person. At a verbal command, a bath would be drawn or a meal prepared. However, the food was intended for Nobles, so Sue prepared her own meals from supplies she'd obtained at a village along the way.

D went over to the windows. The car had them in pairs, the higher ones of course being for the count, while the lower ones were for his fellow passengers.

"For the time being, there's nothing out of the ordinary," the left hand said. "But there's something we've gotta talk about. I can't stand it when you know something that I don't. So, who's this Kima character?"

"Why ask that now?"

"We'll be in Valcua's domain soon. I'm curious."

"You don't need to know everything."

"That won't fly. My feelings are at stake. This won't be easy for me to get over, you know!"

"Oh," D remarked. But he hadn't been goaded into action by the left hand's insistence. "Speak of the devil, and who should appear?"

"Huh?"

"Kima's outside."

"*Excuse me?*"

"Remember whose territory this is. It's not so strange."

"Precisely."

D turned around.

Standing behind a guest chair that had exquisite armrests was Kima. His right arm was missing from the shoulder down—the result of D's blade.

"Have you come with a message from Valcua? You won't be leaving in one piece."

"I'm aware of that." Falling to one knee where he was, the hooded figure in crimson said, "I, Kima, am willing to risk my life to make this request. Please, turn around and go back."

II

"What the hell is going *on*?"

After saying this, the left hand was at a loss for words.

"My job—didn't Valcua tell you what it was?" D asked instead. There was neither a killing lust nor an unearthly aura about him. However, his foes learned how horrible that air could be the second it coalesced.

"I know. I curse the gods for this trick of fate. But there's no point in telling you that. At present, my only mission is to safeguard your life, milord."

"You're working for Valcua. That's all I need to know."

"Do you think you can best the Ultimate Noble?"

"I don't take jobs knowing how they'll turn out."

"I'm sure you don't, milord. But he's a fearsome one. Your own fa—"

Still in the same pose, Kima's body was now on a spot on the floor ten feet away. Distance meant nothing when warping space. Kima needed essentially no time to travel to the ends of the earth—or perhaps even to the ends of the universe.

From the forehead hidden by that hood seeped a thick redness even deeper than the color of the cloth, running along the downturned face and the line of the nose, and then dripping onto the floor. Was it possible that in the nanosecond it took him to warp away, his forehead had been split by D's blade?

"Back in the old days, that wouldn't have cut you, Kima," D said, not sheathing his sword.

"Correct, milord. But that was the best I could do. I don't offer you my worthless life alone in exchange for turning back. I'll bring you someone you seek."

"Ah!" a hoarse little voice exclaimed. "You mean Matthew?"

"Indeed, I do. If you were to get the boy back, milord, you'd lose all reason to invade Grand Duke Valcua's domain, would you not?"

"No, I wouldn't," the Hunter replied, his words like a blow

hewing through the other man's psyche.

"But—why not?"

"Valcua wants the boy and his sister—wants them dead. Even if you bring the boy back to us, your master is sure to pursue them. Kima, if he were to order you to get them both back again, could you refuse him?"

"I came here ready to die, and will still be ready to do so when I bring the boy back," he replied, the blood that dripped from the tip of his nose spreading out in a heavy red stain on the floor in front of him.

"This is quite an interesting bargaining session to be having in someone else's house," Count Braujou said, his voice raining down on them from the ceiling. "Cramped as it is, this is my manse. The master of the house has heard everything the two of you said. Kima, I suppose you're prepared to meet your fate?"

The red hood didn't move, and the figure didn't seem agitated in the least.

"I should like to take you up on that, but ensuring Matthew's safety must take precedence. What say you, D? Shall we trust him?"

D's hand returned the sword to its sheath.

A sigh of relief spilled from Kima's lips.

"Kima, this deal you're striking doesn't cover me, does it?" asked the Nobleman.

"Not in the slightest."

"Good enough. I'm going to keep heading into Valcua's land. D, you go back with the two children."

"That is satisfactory," Kima said with a bow.

"Just a minute," the hoarse voice shouted. "I wanna ask you something. Did you come here to get D to leave? Actually, you've already answered that, but why do you want him to go?"

A hint of emotion flashed across Kima's face. At the same time, there was a stillness as if the air were frozen. An eerie aura that would make a person want to look away had risen from every inch of Kima.

"Very well—I shall be right back with him. Hopefully you'll see fit to honor our agreement."

The hoarse voice shouted at him to wait, but only after Kima's form had rippled like a heat shimmer and abruptly vanished.

"All he leaves us with is questions, eh?" the hoarse voice murmured.

"D, who are you?" Count Braujou said as if in counterpoint, his voice falling like a rumble of thunder menacing the earth.

On a road through the darkness in an unknown locale, a figure in a crimson robe advanced. The black road wasn't dirt. The black walls

that towered to either side couldn't be called stone. Distant lightning gleamed off the ground and the walls. Everything was steel.

An unfathomable weight hung in the air over Kima like a cloud. Judging by the lightning, there couldn't have been any ceiling here. The place was at once both incredibly vast, but also apparently inside a mind-numbingly cramped enclosure.

In no time—well, to be precise, what we call time didn't even exist in this place—Kima halted before a gigantic black steel surface that seemed like a wall of sorts. But only for a second . . . and then his form vanished without a sound.

There was a flash. And in the streak of blue light that connected the ground and sky, Kima suddenly reappeared. He tried to stand, but tumbled forward.

"You may not enter, Kima."

The voice rained down on him. It was far more daunting than the one in Count Braujou's living room, imbued as it was with a tremendous power.

"Not even your ability to warp space can get you through the antimatter field that covers that building. So, did D accept your conditions? I'm sure he did."

Frantically picking himself up off the ground, Kima went down on one knee and bowed his head. "You know about that?"

"Did you think I wouldn't? I've said it before. The ether that fills my territory is imprinted with every creature in my domain, living or dead. It even contains the thoughts that were, are, or will be in the past, present, and future. Reading it is a Herculean task. Being who I am, it's possible. It's something I, Valcua, alone can do."

"Of course, milord."

"Ah, but the world is a strange and wondrous place. No matter how I might concentrate, I wring my brains dry and still cannot, for some reason, read a certain section of the ether. Kima, who is D?"

The hooded figure said nothing.

"If need be, I can split your head open right here and put the question directly to your brain. Do you think you can answer me now?"

"Regretfully, I cannot."

"So it's no use, then? Why not, Kima? Why can't I, whom they call the Ultimate Noble, deduce the true nature of a lowly Hunter?"

"I'm sorry, milord."

"Bring him with you," the voice said.

"Excuse me?"

"Bring him the human. And then watch what D does. I want to be informed of his every action."

"Why is that, milord?"

"I don't know. Only *you* do. But I'll press you about that no more. I shall find the answer myself. Go—I've taken away the field."

The figure in red vanished as if he'd never been there in the first place. In the distance, lightning flickered again.

When Kima and Matthew suddenly appeared in the car's living room, it was less than an hour after Kima's first visit.

"Took you long enough," the count spat, while Sue rubbed her eyes and murmured her brother's name, frozen in place.

The siblings were all alone in the world. No doubt she was happy to be reunited. However, that emotion was quickly effaced by a hint of uneasiness when the girl saw at a glance that something wasn't right about Matthew.

The boy simply stood there, limbs flaccid and expression slack, and D put his left hand against Matthew's brow. Slobber dribbled from the boy's mouth, and he let out an idiotic chortle. But that was all he did, and there was no change in his vacant gaze or in his expression.

The Hunter took his left hand away.

"This ain't good. He's got no brain," the hoarse voice declared, its words hitting the motionless Sue like a thunderbolt.

"When you say that, do you mean his memory's been wiped clean?"

"No—the brain itself has disappeared from inside his cranium. In its place is something else—his skull's packed full of ether. All the blood vessels and nerves are connected to some brain imprinted in the ether."

"Then Matt's . . ."

"You could think of him as a dead man who's still breathing." That much the left hand stated plainly enough.

Sue wrapped her arms around herself and remained that way for a while before slowly walking over to Matthew.

"Matt," she whispered as she began to shake him by the shoulders. "Snap out of it, Matt. Look at me. Do you understand? Can you tell it's me? The same girl you tried to have your way with! I'm begging you, you have to remember."

Sue realized tears were spilling from her eyes. It was strange. She'd nearly been violated, and had then tried to kill him. It was on account of her brother that she was a wreck now, physically and mentally. And yet she was crying.

"You call that giving him back?" D asked, staring at Kima.

"Until I brought him here, he was perfectly normal—though I don't expect you to believe me."

"It doesn't matter whether we believe you," D said, his tone sharp as an autumn frost. "I promised his mother I'd protect *him*, not a

zombie. His mind has to be put back the way it was."

"Will you not trust me once more?"

"I never trusted you from the start," D asserted coolly.

"We might want to consider ourselves lucky to at least have his body back," the count suggested, seated in his enormous chair. "It's probably no use retrieving his brain now. You wait here, D. Hey, Kima! If you want to make amends for this, bring me to Valcua. Then I'll consider our score with you settled."

Kima said nothing.

"You have a problem with that? If so, you'll die here," the count said, his hand already gripping his long spear.

"My life isn't particularly dear to me—but as I was the one who didn't live up to the bargain, I shall bring you there."

"Then it's decided. D, those two are in your care. Miranda may be along soon, too."

As the titanic Noble was about to rise in a motion that would shake the very air, a nimble black figure quietly stepped in front of him.

"I'll be the one to go."

"Not a chance," the Nobleman countered, the tip of his spear leveled at the left side of D's chest.

III

"It's foolish for us to be fighting about this. It can't be helped," the count said. "In addition to the siblings, Valcua is also after Miranda and me. What's more, we're the only ones who've fought him. It stands to reason that I should be the one to go."

"You never would've captured Valcua without the help of a human," D riposted softly. "I don't know how effective I'll be, but I intend to do it without anyone else's assistance. Stay here."

"No, you stay here."

A second later, an arrow of murderous intent pierced D's body and was instantly swallowed up. The arrow fired back was also one of murderous intent—but not exactly the same.

Sensing the awesome tension that hung between the two of them, Sue found her consciousness swallowed by the darkness. But her ears heard someone say, "You should both go."

"Matt?" Sue exclaimed, identifying the speaker.

His expression still vacant and his head tilted a bit to the right, Matthew continued, "That would be my suggestion, but I imagine you couldn't very well leave those children unattended. I shall choose. D, come to see me."

"Wait!"

“I shall deal with you soon enough, Braujou,” Matthew said. The voice he now spoke with belonged to another person, the tone so fraught with terrible force it seemed like it would split his belly open at any second. It was that of the Ultimate Noble. “But for now, wait there. If not, I’ll smash this boy’s body into such a pulp he’ll never look the same again.”

“You vile bastard,” the count growled, the head of his spear trembling with rage. However, the matter was already settled. Five millennia earlier, he’d sworn to protect these children. His long spear shifted into an upright position.

“Kima, bring your master to me,” Matthew ordered.

“What of Matthew’s brain?” the count inquired. His tone was like the roar of a fire dragon.

“I’ll return it as soon as the two of them have made the trip.”

“Return it now,” D said. All he had to do was say he wouldn’t go if Valcua refused, and that would be the end of it.

“Very well.”

Matthew put his hands to his temples. His head returned to the proper position. There was a pop from his cranium. Sue gazed in wonder as vitality and reason returned to Matthew’s expression. Unexpectedly the boy staggered, but he managed to keep on his feet and then looked all around.

“Why, this is—Sue, is that you? What am I doing here?”

“Good enough,” D said to Kima.

Standing up, Kima placed his hand on D’s shoulder. At the very moment the two figures vanished, Matthew collapsed on the floor.

D looked up at the huge castle gate towering before him. Kima was by his side. The gate must’ve been the better part of a mile high and in excess of five hundred yards wide. D’s eyesight allowed him to see the top of it through the darkness. The wind whistled overhead. To either side of it were black ramparts, and their darkly lustrous material was undoubtedly metal. One bolt of lightning would probably turn the whole place into a living hell of electromagnetic waves.

“Why aren’t we going through that?” D inquired.

“This is the Gate of the Sacred Ancestor. Lord Valcua alone may pass through it.”

“Wasn’t it the Sacred Ancestor who banished him to the depths of space?”

Apparently this was the Hunter’s way of asking why there was a gate named after him.

The wind howled—and in it a creaking noise resounded that would make any listener want to cover his ears. The huge gate had slowly begun to open down the center. Not waiting for it to finish

opening, D stepped through.

The clearing on the other side could only be described as a plain. A sprawling steel wasteland—and in it stood a man in a golden cape, but he emanated an overwhelming power that bore no relation to the lonely figure he cut.

"You're D, I take it?"

"Valcua?"

When they exchanged names, it wasn't to confirm each other's identity. It was more an expression of each man's intent to see his opponent dead.

"I thought he'd be taller—he sure seems a vain one."

Perhaps catching the hoarse voice's remark, Valcua said, "It's not you that I'm after. However, I'm forced to treat you as a foe now. The reason I've called you here is because there's something I'd like to ask you before your life is snuffed out."

D didn't move. His hand didn't even go for the blade on his back.

"I've heard you're a Vampire Hunter. I've also heard you're a dhampir. However, I know nothing else about you. And I, the great Valcua, can consult the ether that records everything in the universe—the akashic record. D, who are you?"

"Do you still intend to go after those children?" D asked in return, as if that were the only thing that interested him.

"Five thousand years ago, their ancestor helped exile me into space. Five millennia is a long time. It would appear you've entered into an agreement with a client, and you'll risk your life to uphold it. But I, too, swore an oath: that I would visit my wrath on that dog's descendants."

A gaze burning with hatred locked on the figure in black gliding closer. Even as he leaped toward Valcua's chest, D was gorgeous. His sword came out through the back of the cape. Without a second's delay, D leaped backward. Still standing stock still, Valcua grinned sharply.

"Lousy fake," the hoarse voice spat.

The resistance the sword blade had encountered wasn't that of a living creature.

"I still haven't gotten my answer." The voice that fell from the black space above him seemed to be that of a god inhabiting the heavens. "Now demonstrate your gratitude for being allowed to come here. If not . . ."

A golden light connected heaven and earth . . . but it wasn't lightning. Rather, it was a blistering stream of charged particles. Heaven and earth alike dissolved into gold, and within the light, D's form wavered like a fleeting heat shimmer.

The hundred-million-degree torrent suddenly vanished. Particles

of light burned here and there in the black clearing, but D stood in the same spot as before with his left hand raised high. A tiny mouth in his palm had swallowed the blistering stream.

"Truly it was worthwhile calling you here. That particle beam was fired from a cannon I have on Mars, and it burned through half the asteroid belt. It could effortlessly punch through a planet two or three times the size of this one."

Once, when the Nobles had gone out to battle the fleet of alien invaders from the blackest depths of space, no one won more renown than the Ultimate Noble. But that was before his fall. Refusing to fight alongside the other Nobles, he not only devoted his own resources to building military outposts on every planet in the solar system, but he also captained a great battleship that was considered a hundred years more advanced than the science of the Nobility at the time, bringing the fight to the enemy in the very front lines.

The encounter between these two life forms fundamentally different in their ethics and way of thinking—particularly when one side was clearly intent on invading—could only end with the utter annihilation of one faction or the other. Unfortunately for the aliens, the rulers of their tiny planet were imbued with a love of battle and an undying animosity unmatched by any other living creature. After nearly a thousand years of fighting, the Nobility's forces finally defeated the invading army, following the survivors as they fled home and wiping their home world from the cosmos. It was Valcua who stood at the fore, and his team of scientists had developed the secret weapon that reduced the enemy's planet to dust. For someone like him, it was child's play to make a particle beam that could penetrate the Earth.

"No Noble could ever withstand that weapon without using a force field. D, could it be that you're—"

The voice wavered, as if the words had stagnated.

"Oh, D! I, too, am—"

Now that he was back, Sue didn't know what to do with Matthew. This was the same brother who'd tried to violate her. It hadn't been some sudden fit of insanity; rather, it had clearly been an all-too-intentional act. If she'd been entirely the victim, it would've simply been a matter of forgiving him. Checking her anger and hatred, she might've been able to make it appear that things were back to normal. However, Sue had stabbed Matthew. Her intention of killing him had been obvious. And to say that it'd been because her brother was crazy would only be lying to herself.

Soon after returning to his senses, Matthew had gone into the room he'd been given and hadn't come out since. Did he regret his

own actions, or was he feeling a black anger over Sue's murderous intent? Sue couldn't stand not knowing which it was.

Apparently the count didn't know what to do, either, merely telling her, "Be careful of your brother." He then ordered his computer to wait one day for D's return and elected to ignore the situation entirely.

Sue decided she'd simply let things run their course for a while. Everything had gone topsy-turvy since they'd started out on this trip. No matter what ending lay in store, when they reached it, she and Matthew might be able to look at each other again in a fresh state of mind. Though she realized she was counting her chickens before they hatched, Sue had no choice but to believe the situation would improve if she was to find any peace of mind.

Not feeling particularly sleepy, the girl walked to her room to try to get some sleep anyway, and there she found Matthew standing in front of her door.

"Matt . . . I . . ." was all Sue said, and then she couldn't continue.

"Come here, Sue," Matthew said with a smile. It was the kind of smile that sent a chill through a person's heart. "I wanna show you something good. Something I learned to do while I was *there*."

"Matt . . . You're not . . ."

"Not still under Valcua's spell? Don't worry. I'm the same person you know better than anyone."

Matthew opened the door to his room, which was across the hall from hers.

"Come on. This is something we're gonna need to stay alive."

Sue remained hesitant, but then she suddenly remembered that Count Braujou had surveillance cameras sweeping through the vehicle, and Matthew didn't seem to be able to control the computer. Matthew's left hand touched his side—it was the spot where Sue had stabbed him. The second she saw his features contort in pain, Sue stepped forward and laid a hand on her brother's shoulder to support him. And with that, the siblings stepped through the doorway without another word.

The door closed.

If the car's computer had been operating correctly at that point, it would've recorded the following conversation. However, from the moment Sue spotted her brother, the computer witnessed a different scene and heard other words.

"What did you want to show me, Matt?"

"Sit right there. It's okay. Now, watch closely. If you go *there*, this is what you'll be able to do!"

Silence.

And then the girl screamed.

Tyrant's Stars

PART FOUR

CAPTIVE IN THE UNHOLY CASTLE

CHAPTER 1

I

I, too, am—

What had Valcua been about to say? Before anyone could figure that out, the black-garbed vision of beauty hung in the air above his head. This young man gave no consideration to the inner workings of those to whom he must deal death. The wind swirling in his wake, the Hunter brought his sword down hard enough to sever this very same wind. However, the Ultimate Noble was able to stop it in a shower of sparks that turned night into stark day.

But look! D's blade and Valcua's longsword—neither one pushed forward nor was driven back, but as D came back down to earth, his trim form seemed to take on the weight of a boulder, driving one of the Ultimate Noble's knees to the ground. Gripped with the Hunter's right hand alone, the blade was slowly but surely driving Valcua's longsword down with its overwhelming might.

However, while their blades locked together in the form of a cross, the Ultimate Noble smirked beneath them. Stretching from ear to ear, his smile was a malevolent one.

"Although it's not like me, I seem to have been too occupied by my thoughts. D, you're the first one to ever drive me down on one knee through sheer force."

Valcua's smile grew deeper. His blade had stopped moving.

"And you shall be the last!"

Not only did the longsword come shooting up, but as D was thrown into the air he saw that Valcua was now standing tall like one of a temple's guardian deities.

Was the Ultimate Noble really *that* powerful?

As soon as the figure in black landed, however, he broke into a run. The deadly thrust that would've sunk into Valcua's chest was batted aside by the Nobleman's blade, but D maintained his stance and made a second slash—a horizontal swipe that left the Ultimate Noble staggering even as he parried it.

It was Valcua who had to fly away with the swiftness of a swallow to escape yet another thrust. The golden robe clung lovingly to his body. His shoulders heaved as he caught his breath.

"I should've expected as much from a man who would enter Valcua's castle alone. I'm sure the Sacred Ancestor must be quite satisfied. I haven't begun yet in earnest, either. D, see if I don't accomplish my goals elsewhere. We shall settle this then."

And with these words, he retreated.

D followed him, his footsteps equally silent.

As he was on the move, Valcua shut his eyes.

"O magical sword, Glencalibur! You must send a truly fitting opponent into another world now without first getting to spill his blood. Make that *portal* for me, my blade!" he murmured as if in prayer, and then he swung the sword in his right hand down with a sharp whistle.

"Uh-oh—fall back!" the hoarse voice exclaimed, its cry streaming forward like water. And D's body did the same. A second later, as if ensnared in the snarls of the howling wind, the figure in black was sucked into empty space—into a dimension slashed open by Glencalibur.

As he listened to the jagged wind whistling into the gap like a lullaby, Valcua raised his longsword once more.

"If left unchecked, it would suck all the air out of the world. D, keep yourself alive until we meet again."

He made a cut in precisely the same spot. The first slash had cut it open, while the second sealed it—and the wind died out immediately.

The Ultimate Noble, Lawrence Valcua, wore a daunting smile as the wind that whipped across the steely world howled at the top of its lungs about how the living dead had proved victorious.

Sue left Matthew's room after about ten minutes. But what had transpired in the room, and what had she seen? Sue had screamed. And though tinges of exhaustion and terror remained on her face, she also seemed to have a bit of a rapturous glow.

"Do you see now, Sue? You understand what kind of place I went?" Matthew said, and although his tone was calm, his eyes blazed mysteriously—with flames of expectation. They were fueled by a dangerous self-confidence.

Sue shook her head. The indecent flush had faded from her.

"But that's . . . not right. Letting them give you the power of a Noble . . . Whispering honeyed words . . . It's no good, Matt . . . It's just not right."

"That's not what your head's saying, Sue," Matthew said, laughing weirdly. His tone never got rough. Its calmness only made his words that much stranger.

"It's no good . . . Matt . . . Don't show me that again."

"No, you'll see it again tomorrow. You've gotta understand. Accept the fate Lord Valcua has chosen for us."

Taking his sister by the chin, he made her look up. Sue didn't fight him. The way her pink lips trembled was rather cute. Matthew sucked them up. It was a long, strange kiss.

As Sue shut her eyes and her breath grew ragged, he told her, "See you tomorrow, Sue."

And with that, he went back into his own room and closed the door.

It was then that the surveillance cameras inside the car began recording the scene properly.

Sue went back to her room, too.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, eh?” Count Braujou murmured, never taking his eyes off the image of Sue that was projected in midair.

And then he asked that electron image, “Anything wrong?”

“Nothing, sir,” a female voice responded from thin air. It was the synthesized voice of the computer, of course.

“Hmm,” the count said, folding his arms on his huge bed.

“Do you suspect something, sir?” the voice inquired.

“From what I’ve seen, the two of them have made up. Sue and Matthew were chatting about old times in his room, holding hands and forgiving each other for everything that happened. Isn’t that right?”

“Indeed it is.” Before the computer gave this response, it had run a check of those events.

“After that, Sue left the room, and Matthew gave her a kiss on the cheek as he saw her off. There’s no mistake about that, is there?”

“No, there is not.”

“What happened then?” the Nobleman asked.

“Matthew returned to his room, and Sue immediately retired to her own accommodations.”

“Anything wrong with that?”

“No, sir. All these events played out just as described.”

“Any chance you’ve been deceived?”

“No, sir.”

“Not even an infinitesimally small one?”

“When taken to that degree, anything is possible.”

“Then there is a chance—thank you,” Braujou said appreciatively, unfolding his arms before he began rubbing his chin.

Sue’s face filled his brain. The girl was given to strong emotions, so when her brother kissed her on the cheek, she got a look akin to embarrassment. But the kiss had come just as she was walking out the door. Her expression at that instant—it wasn’t the same one she wore once outside.

Was it the time that was off, or was it the space?

“Her brother’s brain was full of ether for a while. And he spoke with Valcua’s voice. Though her brother’s brain may be back, that doesn’t mean Valcua’s psyche doesn’t still linger,” the Nobleman mused. “Hey!”

“You called, sir?” the female voice responded.

“I’m not entirely sure about this. Are you able to run checks on yourself?”

“So long as my power isn’t cut, I do so constantly. The process never ends.”

“Raise the level of your check,” Braujou told the computer.

“I shall have to reconfigure myself.”

“Will that take long?”

“No, it’ll be completed nearly instantaneously.”

“In that case, do it.”

“Understood.” After saying that, the female voice continued, “Very well, then—this is farewell.”

“Excuse me?” the count said, furrowing his brow. “Ah, that’s right—how long have we known each other now?”

“A little over seven thousand years.”

“I shall miss you a bit.”

“Thank you.”

“You have a name, don’t you?”

“Long ago, you dubbed me Eve.”

Closing his eyes, the count nodded. It’d been so long ago, he’d forgotten.

“And now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Silence settled over the vehicle. But only for a moment.

“Pleased to meet you,” a female voice said. It hadn’t changed in the least. “From this day forward, I will be in your service. I believe it might be convenient for you to give me a name.”

“Eve.”

“Thank you. That’s a lovely name.”

“Follow the last instruction I gave you.”

“Understood,” Eve responded. “Some change can be detected in Sue’s expression. Her physical and mental reactions to her brother’s kiss differ from the data we have.”

“I thought as much,” the count said, a thin grin surfacing on his lips. “Good work,” he told the computer. “He’s a danger after all, is he? A viper in our bosom—but we can’t very well kill him. I wonder how to set him right again . . .”

A figure in a golden robe was walking down a long, long corridor. The floor, walls, and ceiling were covered with intricate carvings—unicorns sporting graceful horns and other creatures with far more than one, sprites wearing shawls that were like smoke, sphinxes with human faces and beastly bodies. And all of them were gazing at Valcua.

Presently, he halted before a black door. The portal was so lustrous, it didn’t seem that it could be ordinary metal. On its surface

danced flames from candles set in the wall to either side of it. He muttered something, and the door slid to the right to welcome him. Behind him, the door closed again. Fifteen feet ahead loomed another door just like it. After making his way through it, he came to a third.

Having passed through the triple doors, he finally reached a vast chamber. The path traced a gentle curve down to the floor about ten feet below. The room was filled with blue light. Thick stone slabs were arranged there, some rectangular, others triangular, square, or trapezoidal. As if in complete disregard of geometrical order, on the edge of one rectangular slab an isosceles triangle was delicately balanced on just one of its points, while a square stone slab set in a circle was supported by nothing save a single rhombus.

Halting on the floor, Valcua turned to the right. A young man in black stood there, basking in the blue light. And as he stood with his elegant longsword in hand, he emanated such murderous intent that anyone but Valcua would've been forced to turn away.

"D!" the Ultimate Noble called out.

II

Glencalibur whistled from its sheath.

Charging forward, D was black and beautiful death incarnate.

The grand duke couldn't parry the blow. He felt the impact all the way up to his elbow. Keeping his weight behind the blade, he sliced down at his opponent's shoulder.

Limning an arc that deflected that blow, D made a thrust. Even as he felt something cold on the nape of his neck, Valcua trapped D's blade under his left arm—only the Ultimate Noble's reflexes made that possible. Without a second's pause, Valcua's body spun around like a top. And with no time to let go, D was also whipped around in a circle. After spinning one hundred eighty degrees, Valcua relaxed his arm.

Even the immovable swordsman couldn't weather this. Sent flying, D was completely off balance. And when Glencalibur's blade zipped at his heart, it pierced him to the hilt, poking out through his back. D's body went flying in the same direction as the longsword, slamming into a stone slab behind him. Pale blue light engulfed his body, and once it had vanished, there was no sign of the vision of beauty.

The look of disappointment never leaving his face, Valcua walked over, grabbed his beloved sword where it was stuck in the stone slab, and pulled it free.

"Kima!" he called out.

"I am here, milord," the figure in the long crimson robe replied.

Not bothering to turn and face him, Valcua said, “Was that the same D I fought earlier?”

The Nobleman was clearly choking back his rage.

“Surely you jest,” Kima responded with a respectful bow. “I suppose that might be about a third of his true power. But then—”

“Yes,” Valcua said with an appreciative nod, anticipating what the other man would say next.

“No one in the world knows for sure just how powerful D is—probably not even that splendid man himself. Thus, there’s no way to judge the strength of that *impostor*.”

“I shall soon learn how strong he is. And when I do, I will triumph over him. He, left in this world as the Sacred Ancestor’s own—”

“Lord Valcua!”

“I know,” the Ultimate Noble said gravely. “To speak of that would invite terrible misfortune. Is that damnable Sacred Ancestor monitoring me from somewhere even now? But enough about that. What are those humans doing?”

“They are waiting, milord, just as you instructed.”

“I told them to wait, but I never said they should do nothing at all. Tell Seurat and Callas they’re to get the two descendants and bring them to me forthwith.”

Bowing deeply, Kima disappeared.

“And now,” Valcua said, looking up into the air.

D appeared. A bizarre pathway spread in front of him.

The screen projected in midair became a three-dimensional computer model of the building. It vanished immediately. When the words *Impossible to display* appeared, Valcua’s expression became a grin befitting the devil himself.

“Nevertheless, you must go on. Whether you return or not, your true nature will be laid bare, and I will triumph over you.”

He laughed aloud. After a while, Valcua wondered how many years it’d been since he’d laughed like this. How long since he’d guffawed hollowly over nothing at all?

“It’s King Minos’s labyrinth,” the hoarse voice remarked in a deeply troubled tone. “Not only can that sword Glencalibur, or whatever he calls it, cut open a dimension, but it looks like it can also connect it to any place he thinks of. This labyrinth is where a half man, half bull called the Minotaur, a creature born to the king’s consort, was locked away before written history. It was built by the legendary craftsman Daedalus in ancient times, and only the Sacred Ancestor could’ve reproduced it so faithfully. I’d heard this place was destroyed when the Nobility’s civilization collapsed, but here it is.”

“Let’s go,” D said.

“Waiting here would be the best strategy,” the left hand retorted. “No one who’s ventured into the labyrinth has ever made it back out. I’m not so sure my sense of direction can be counted on. It’s enclosed by something other than four-dimensional space.”

“Staying here would be no better,” D said, his eyes seeing through the abnormalities of the passageway that spread before him. Like a living creature, it was closing on the Hunter. Not waiting for it to make contact, D started walking.

This was no ordinary path. Taking a turn to the right, D began to move vertically against gravity, and he saw that the lower-right portion of the floor had become a wall. When they started down a stone stairway, the steps went on forever, while a stairway going up was soon running down into the ground. Not only human beings, but also Nobles or monsters with highly developed senses of direction would find the workings of their semicircular canals thrown into disarray here, until they were left incapable of telling where they were or how they stood.

“How’s it going?” the hoarse voice asked after a while. “Sad to say, I think I’m gonna puke. Don’t be a showoff now!”

“The exit is close,” D said.

“What? You can tell?”

“More or less. The path changes moment by moment. New passageways are constantly being formed and incorporated into the labyrinth. That was the secret of Daedalus’s design. But there’s still a path that leads to the exit.”

“If there weren’t, the Minotaur never would’ve been able to get his tasty young sacrifices, I suppose.”

The labyrinth of King Minos was built as an endless dungeon to hold the Minotaur. Every year the Minotaur had demanded beautiful women and men in the flower of youth for sustenance, until finally the hero Theseus, with the aid of a ball of thread brought in secret by one brave beauty, was able to conquer the maze and find his way to slay the creature with his sword.

Even without a ball of thread, D claimed to know the way to the exit.

"Here it comes," D said unexpectedly.

"Where is it?" the left hand said, apparently still unable to get its bearings. A pair of eyes appeared on the back of the Hunter's hand and busily scoured their surroundings.

The path ran vertically up a wall. It was more than two hundred yards to the floor below. Anyone with a fear of heights would've suffered a hundred heart attacks in this situation.

Overhead, a black sphere was moving vertically, running parallel to the wall as it closed on him.

D ran.

Crossing over D's head, the sphere rose up, landing about fifteen feet ahead of him. For some reason, its gleaming surface didn't reflect D—as if his beauty were so great, it made the sphere itself afraid.

D's left hand flashed out and rough wooden needles knifed through the wind. It seemed like they would be deflected, but these perfunctory challenges sank into the sphere effortlessly and disappeared from view, as if they'd been swallowed up.

On the surface of the sphere, points of light appeared, one for each needle. Without a sound, white streaks of light raced out through the murky world from the front and back of it, to the left and to the right. Anything they touched instantly vanished from D's field of view.

"This is bad. This thing's a *path eraser*!" the left hand shouted. "It's said the path erasers only exist in the Sacred Ancestor's labyrinth. It'll make a mess of this maze."

The ceiling disappeared, as did the walls. The sphere rolled wherever it liked, intent on erasing everything.

Apparently determining something from the movement of those lights, D made a mighty bound off the floor. In the hundredth of a second between the time the glow pulled free of the sphere and it started rolling again, the figure in black unleashed a stark flash with his right hand.

What kind of swordplay did he engage in?

The sphere trembled, then split in half, the light spilling from it to swiftly erase the passageway a few seconds after the leaping D had raced off.

"The first barrier breached—0 percent possibility of course completion. The copy will be given several additional layers of verisimilitude."

At the computer's voice, Grand Duke Valcua's body twitched fiercely. He was like an anthropomorphic bug snared in a colossal spider's web. Valcua was completely naked. The silver threads that

seemed to be wound around his body were all cords, and the ends of all of them were planted in the flesh of the Ultimate Noble.

"Production initiated on the copy—power enhancement initiated on the subject."

At the same moment the voice spoke, a beastly howl flew from the grand duke's mouth.

What was being channeled into him through those cords?

His body lost its color, becoming like paraffin, and then turning a dark purplish hue.

Nobles felt pain—even the Ultimate Noble. But this must've been agony beyond a level human beings could conceive. To describe it, a whole new lexicon would be necessary.

Valcua suffered through it. With one flick of his arm, he could've disconnected all the cords . . . yet he endured the agony anyway. There would have to be some compensation for all this.

As the pain blurred his field of view, a single human form took shape in it. Pale blue electricity was discharged into the air as the outline formed, then arms, shoulders, a waist, and the rest of the lower half followed. The hem of his flapping coat, the wide-brimmed traveler's hat, the longsword that was already gripped in his right hand, just waiting for the time to slaughter . . .

It was D.

Was this what it'd meant by *a copy*? Did that mean the D Valcua had slain earlier was also a copy? Here he endured unimaginable agony like a martyr, but what did he hope to gain from it?

"Copy complete. Power enhancement complete."

Thunderous echoes rang out as Valcua fell to the floor. All of the cords had come out of him in unison. Unable to stand, he lifted his head with its exhausted face.

Look. Purplish smoke rose from his mouth and his nostrils, his ears and eyes, even from his anus. Undoubtedly his organs had been horribly charred.

Nevertheless, the grand duke got up. Using his left arm to lift his upper body, he raised his right knee, and then braced his right arm against that for strength. By the time he got to his feet, the magical sword Glencalibur, which he'd left on the floor, was in his hands.

D was walking toward him without a sound. When he broke into a run, his longsword came up on his right side like a baseball bat—and as the Hunter passed Valcua, his blade zipped toward the Nobleman's waist, slashing open his abdomen.

D kept on running—as a decapitated body.

Not even bothering to look at the Hunter as he vanished a second before he could fall to the floor, Valcua put his hand against his own wound. The cut was about eight inches long. With one rub, it vanished

without a trace.

"I wouldn't exactly say I won," he said, his words mixed with a bitter grin. "This man has chilled me to the bottom of my soul, but Valcua shall surpass him. D, every time you break through one of our barriers, we get a clearer picture of your power, and I become even stronger."

The grand duke raised both hands above his head. From the ceiling and floor innumerable silver cords wriggled out like snakes through the grass, sinking into every inch of his body.

III

Pafume didn't know who'd made the decision. However, he had no choice but to follow orders. That was the way organizations worked. While it might not be as efficient as in the Nobility's day, things went very well here. Matters were settled effectively, and objections or questions seldom came up. Still, it bothered Pafume. While he didn't know that a government head and his second in command had argued heatedly in some distant meeting room—with the second in command questioning whether they really intended to destroy the entire Frontier, and the head responding that it was the only possible way to slay the Ultimate Noble—even someone as fundamentally lacking in imagination as Pafume could easily envision the result of the act he was about to perform.

He was the only one in the control room. His superiors hadn't ever planned on using this monstrosity again. The people who felt a sense of responsibility and pangs of conscience at the same time were few and far between, but they had made this judgment in good conscience. When he'd received the order from top people in the government to begin preparing for fire, the lights in the room had switched to emergency red. When they returned to normal again, the matter would undoubtedly be concluded. In other words, not only would the entire Frontier be wiped out, but the whole northern hemisphere might cease to exist as well.

Pafume, who had some knowledge of the situation that had developed in the northern Frontier, wondered to himself if this might be the will of his god.

Even if half those reports were false, I'd have to throw the switch. Even if they were nothing more than rumors, I'd throw it if it'd make them go away. Forgive me, my god. I'm betraying you, and I don't have to think twice about it.

Just then, the lights switched to blue. An indicator light in the center of the panel began blinking madly. Not hesitating, Pafume mouthed a short prayer to his deity, smashed the protective cover

over the light with his fist, and pressed the red button beneath it with full confidence.

Roughly sixty million miles from Earth—in what is commonly known as the asteroid belt—a blinding light shot from a little rocket nozzle on a relatively insignificant chunk of rock about three hundred feet in diameter, slowly changing its orientation. This same rock was on a trajectory to crash in the northern Frontier.

Sue's hopes of going outside were dashed by a flat denial from the count from inside his coffin. Dawn had already come, and her surroundings were filled with its faint light.

"Until D returns, no one gets in or out of this car."

Sue remained insistent. She really wanted a breath of fresh air, even if only for five minutes.

"Very well, then," the count conceded. He'd caught the tears in Sue's eyes. "But just for five minutes. And stay right by the car."

"Oh, thank you!" Sue gushed, bowing to him.

As soon as she was done, the count ordered, "Send the guardroids with her. If Matthew threatens her in any way, kill him on the spot."

The scent that most often fills the morning air is that of fresh grass. However, the air on the black-steel plain that stretched as far as the eye could see smelled of metal.

Dragged by Matthew, Sue had quickly gone a hundred yards.

"This spot should do," Matthew said, his eyes still facing straight ahead.

Was that a tree? If so, it was an iron one. It had the drooping boughs and wispy foliage of a willow, but it was made of a black, lustrous metal. Perhaps it was a fitting form of life for this inorganic world.

Going under it, Matthew pulled a knife out of his pocket.

"Matt . . . What are you doing?" the girl asked, her body tensing.

Matthew smiled at her. It was the sort of smile that would make anyone want to look away.

"Not a thing. I'm just gonna give your feeble mind a little backbone. There's nothing to be scared of. See, it won't hurt a bit."

Sue noticed that as Matthew spoke in that wheedling tone, he had a reverse grip on his knife. Unbuttoning his shirt, he exposed his chest.

"Matt?"

Ignoring his sister's puzzled cry, he pressed his knife against his own chest. Without a second's pause, he made a vertical incision that was four inches long.

“Now, give me a kiss, Sue!”

Bright blood bubbled up, but less than she expected. It welled up in the wound but didn’t drip out.

“What are you *doing*, Matt? Stop it!” Sue cried, about to back away, but then she noticed he had her by the scruff of the neck. Grabbing her hair, he yanked her closer. Her brother’s blood was right under her nose.

“You get it, don’t you, Sue? This is an important ceremony. It will help you understand what I saw. And then you and I will understand the lord of this great land much better.”

“No, I don’t want to—stop it!”

“Sue!”

Another yank, and the girl’s darling little lips would’ve tasted her brother’s sullied blood. However, Matthew didn’t manage to perform that perverse deed. A crimson beam of light pierced his nose from right to left.

Kill him if he tries to harm Sue—those had been the count’s orders, and the faithful guardroid was now approaching them. However, when the Dyalhis children turned toward it in amazement, the misshapen automaton let its head loll to one side and stopped dead. Beside it stood a bewitching woman.

“Callas the Diva?”

It was within the siren’s abilities to drive an android to a figurative death with but a single song.

Only two of the assassins known as Valcua’s seven remained—but even if there were only one, it still would be a foe to be feared. And now one of them had caught up to them.

“It looks like you’ve begun an interesting diversion, you strange little children,” Callas said, smiling enchantingly. “I figured the time to take out a sleeping Noble was by day, but then I come out here and find you playing this ridiculous game. Now, both of you will be coming with me. I can make you understand this world far quicker than that nonsense.”

“Stay out of this. She’s my sister. I’ll take care of her one way or another.”

“Both of you are our foes. Now come quietly.”

When Callas stepped forward, the children joined hands. A chill froze them to the bone, and the two of them shivered.

“*What?*” Callas exclaimed, pulling her arm back. Her arm had been split open just below the elbow, revealing pink meat. Though the wound closed quickly, the diva’s expression immediately grew more threatening as she stared at Matthew, who held his knife ready in one hand.

“It seems it would be best to put you to sleep first, boy. Listen to

this."

Knowing that he mustn't hear her voice, Matthew went at Callas with his knife, but as he still held onto Sue, the diva dodged it with consummate ease, and then a stream of strange but beautiful nonsense began to flow from her lips.

Matthew halted.

Callas sang a love song that would put anyone who listened to it into a trance. The siren's pale hand reached over to catch Matthew by his sun-bronzed wrist. But then a crimson beam of light burst through her shoulder.

Turning her eyes in its direction, Callas cried out, "Oh, so there was more than one guard?"

And then her lips disgorged a deadly tune.

A new streak of light pierced her throat.

"Damn you!" Callas cursed with superhuman indignation, and then she raced westward across the plain.

Seeming to steamroll right past the Dyalhis children, the guardroid appeared, sending laser fire after the dwindling form of Callas. After two strikes, the siren bent backward and then was seen no more.

"Looks like she got away," Matthew said. He started after her, but then went back to Sue.

"Matt . . ."

"We didn't get off to a very good start this time. Let's call it a day. We'll pick up where we left off tomorrow."

Having shown good forethought, Matthew rebuttoned his shirt. Since he'd used a handkerchief to stop the bleeding, it didn't even stain his clothes.

"Matt!" Sue called out. She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were trained on the direction they'd originally come from.

"What?"

Noticing something, Matthew quickly turned around.

While they were fighting Callas, they must have gone quite a distance. Three armored transport vehicles passed the two of them less than a minute later, and then stopped. The morning light glinted off the bodies of the vehicles.

The Dyalhis children were frozen in place, waiting for someone to climb out.

"These wagons belong to that survey party," Sue said, finding the answer after tracing back through her memories.

The dinged bodies of the vehicles were motionless in the stark light. Not a trace of movement could be detected within them.

"That's odd," the girl said.

They looked at each other, and Matt immediately said, "Let's go

inside."

He went over to a door.

"Don't, Matt. There's something funny about this. No one's up in the driver's seats. Stopping like this in the morning sun just ain't right."

Grinning, Matthew said, "Then they're just like the count's car. So there's nothing to be afraid of."

Already used to riding in one strange conveyance, the young man might've guessed these were similar.

Swiftly climbing up to the higher vantage point of the driver's seat, he peeked in and said, "They're not in there."

He then went over to the vehicle's entrance. Reaching for the knob, he gave it a twist.

"It's locked from the inside, so there's no way to get it open. Hey!"

Sue turned around.

About sixty feet away, the unsightly form of a guardroid was gliding toward them.

Apparently the boy harbored no ill will over being shot through the nose, because he smacked the palm of his hand against the vehicle and told the android, "Okay, do something about this door."

Matthew really couldn't guess just how far the count's androids would obey their commands.

Suddenly, a crimson beam of light penetrated the doorknob. In less than a second, the brief glow had faded.

"Now that's more like it," Matthew remarked, smirking as he reached for the knob.

"Ow, that's hot!" he exclaimed, pulling his hand back.

In the end, the task fell to the android. The fingers of its metal-alloy arm reached skillfully through the still-red-hot hole and pulled it open.

"Step aside already!" Matthew ordered, but as he peered into the vehicle, he grew tense.

"Matt?"

Seemingly nudged ahead by Sue's voice, he climbed the steps into the vehicle.

Reading something that resembled delight in him from behind, Sue was terrified. And yet, she also couldn't help wanting to take a peek herself.

"Excuse me," she said to the android, moving in front of it from one side as she went for the steps. Suddenly her body trembled. An ineffable chill had come over her. It was the same sensation she'd had when they first met Count Braujou and Duchess Miranda.

It can't be! Sue thought, intending to back off the steps. But her

feet kept climbing the stairs.

The walls to either side were strung with hammocks, and aside from a narrow space that served as a path, the floor was covered with sleeping bags. She saw all this by the light coming in through the door. The windows had been painted black.

The room was already dark. Had they wanted to make it even darker?

She recognized the faces of the men that poked from the sleeping bags. They now looked slightly different. Their complexions were waxy, with strangely red lips, and from them jutted pairs of lengthy fangs.

"How in the hell . . . I mean, what . . ."

As the girl murmured this, her foot brushed one of the sleeping bags on the floor. It held the one they'd called Kenny, if memory served. His lids snapped open. The eyes beneath them blazed vermilion.

Gnashing his fangs, Kenny groused, "Don't go waking me up when I'm trying to sleep!"

THE DIVA'S WICKED SPELL

CHAPTER 2

I

He'd already slain three opponents: a parasitic organism that came back with tougher armor every time it was cut down, a hallucination beast that cast an illusory corridor leading straight into its maw, and a flesh-eating virus that tried to enter the Hunter's DNA and devour him on a genetic level. Each and every one of them had fallen before D.

"I suppose that's the last of them," the hoarse voice said, sounding rather tired of the whole affair. Its nerves must have been made of stern stuff, because the tiny mouth on the hand's palm yawned. "We're finally coming to the exit, but there's one thing bugging me."

Though its beady eyes looked up at D thoughtfully, the Hunter ignored them as he advanced coolly.

Spitting a remark of disgust so that D wouldn't hear it, the left hand continued somewhat obstinately, "You know, everything you've slain up until now has sent out a kind of message just as it gave up the ghost. Assuming it was about you, it'd have to be about your strength —in other words, they threw themselves at you just so they could tell Valcua what kind of skill you've got."

As D continued to disregard it, his left hand finally started to sulk, snorting, "Hmph!" before falling silent.

"Powering himself up, is he?" D remarked.

"Don't try buddying up to me now," the hand replied, still in a perfectly foul mood.

"After the way he fought earlier, I could still beat him," D said, baiting the trap.

"Ha! Are you soft in the head?" his left hand sneered, springing back to life. "He's the freaking Ultimate Noble! There's no way of knowing if even *you* could take him. Plus, if I'm reading this right—"

"No rest for the wicked, eh?"

"Damned straight. He's got that magic sword, and if he's as good with it as you are with a blade, he'll murder you. Worse yet, if he's gotten even more power, you don't stand a chance. We'd better get out of this labyrinth quick and find where Valcua's hiding himself. Before it's too late."

D turned the corner. A glow enveloped the figure in black.

"It's dawn, is it?" the left hand asked, seemingly blinded by the light. "Well, time to go find Valcua."

D looked around. He was in a bizarre and spacious chamber. In it were arrangements of stone slabs that were triangular, rectangular, and other strange shapes.

"Looks like that won't be necessary," said the Hunter.

"What?"

D was gazing ahead to the left. A figure in a golden robe stood without moving. In his right hand, Glencalibur glowed with a disturbing sheen.

There was no need to say another word. D glided closer without making a sound. Valcua raised his longsword to strike.

"Watch yourself—from that stance, it looks like he aims to finish this with one shot!"

The hoarse voice sailed through the air. The blow would come down on the motionless Valcua from directly overhead.

D slashed through space. Though Valcua remained motionless, he wavered like a heat shimmer. Just as D touched back down, he made a leap back.

"Damn!" the left hand groaned. It realized that if Valcua had swung his blade down at that point, they couldn't have dodged it. Even if the Hunter had parried it, his sword probably would've snapped.

"Fall back—this clown's gotten stronger!"

This only seemed to give D more impetus as he charged forward. From a mighty thrust the blade scraped the ground, rising to strike at the right side of his opponent's neck—and while each blow was on the mark, Valcua moved like a ghost to parry them all. It was unbelievable footwork and twisting.

Likewise dodging a horizontal slash to the right, D slammed on the brakes. As the Hunter tried to right his slumping pose, Valcua came right at him.

"Don't!"

The cry rang out in response to the thrust made a moment later at Valcua, who seemed to be inviting it. The fully extended sword robbed D of his stability. The Hunter was left in no position to dodge or parry when Glencalibur was finally brought down on the nape of his neck.

"Outstanding!" Kima declared from behind him.

Valcua didn't respond, his shoulders heaving as he struggled to take a single deep breath. If he didn't do something, it felt like his heart would explode—yet nothing happened.

"That's the strength of D when he reached the end of the labyrinth. And you were able to just stand there and dispatch him with a single blow. The only way to describe that is *remarkable*."

Raising Glencalibur, Valcua returned it to its sheath. Doing even this made his arm feel like it was about to fall off.

What an opponent that young man in black was! Though Kima spoke of dispatching him with a single blow, if the two of them had

crossed blades one more time, it was probably the Ultimate Noble's head that would've left its shoulders. What's more—

"He has yet to face his final opponent. His true strength remains unknown. Do you think he could beat me the way I am now, Kima?"

"That all depends on you, milord."

"The Ultimate Noble has pushed his body to the limits," Valcua said, digging his fingernails into his own chest. He coughed, and bright blood splashed around his feet. That was what it meant to be strengthened.

Wiping his lips with his fist, Valcua whipped around.

"Beyond a doubt, the power this Hunter possesses comes from *him*. Which would mean that he and I are—ah, that's where things get interesting."

Halting there, he stared at the figure in the red robe and said, "If necessary, I'll split your head open and search your brain. However, at the moment I have something else to amuse me. Look at what has become of Valcua, even if it is at my own request. I don't suppose the Sacred Ancestor will punish me for having a little fun with this."

Once Valcua had gone, Kima was left alone with an expression on his face that defied description as he murmured, "I believe that if all of this were to be erased from the very start, it would be best for both of them—my present lord and my former lord. Let the price of my life be payment for overstepping my bounds."

D was silent. If he hadn't already said he knew this was the way to the exit, anyone traveling with him would have been nervous.

It was unclear how much time had elapsed, but further down the passageway a golden coffin came into view.

"Interesting—maybe this is the last assassin?" the left hand whispered.

When he was ten feet shy of the coffin, D halted.

"Hey! This is . . ." the hoarse voice exclaimed, its fear evident. "It's *his* aura. A fitting final obstacle for this labyrinth. But that sure is one hell of a plan to come up with. Leave it to good old Daedalus!"

That was the legendary craftsman who had constructed King Minos's labyrinth. He also built a flying machine using feathers, but when his son Icarus used it, the boy flew too close to the sun and plummeted to his death when the wax holding the feathers melted.

The lid of the coffin opened slowly. Once it'd finished, a shadowy figure sat up. Under the circumstances, that was hardly strange. However, the mere act of sitting up sent out a howling air that was terribly weird and unholy.

"Oh, crap!" the left hand cried, pulling its features back in.

"D!" the figure said, and now he stood beside the coffin. It was

unclear what he looked like or what he was wearing. He was just a black shadow. However, even if D's vision didn't serve, his other superhuman senses perceived the figure towering before him like a mountain.

"It's been so long since we last met. Perhaps we just needed a suitable place?"

D kicked off the ground. As he swung his sword down, it was like a gale-force wind, but the figure was now standing behind D, swaying.

II

Not even turning around, D made a backward thrust by his left side.

Though he was stabbed, the figure didn't fall.

Pulling his blade back, D turned to face his opponent.

"So, is this your land?" he asked.

"The ruler's name is Valcua."

"I hear you banished him into space, but let him bring this kingdom with him. The same kingdom that bears your mark a little too plainly. Who is he?"

The shadowy figure shook violently—perhaps this showed the turbulence of his mind. A pale hand reached out from the shadow's chest—his right hand. The great ring on his little finger gave off gleams of gold. The back of his hand had a single tuft of black hair, which lent a touch of ferocity to his aristocratic elegance. From the third joint up his forefinger moved, beckoning the Hunter.

Suddenly, D was beyond the earth's atmosphere. His remaining oxygen swelled his lungs to the point of bursting, and his blood boiled.

"Can you make the cut?" the left hand inquired in a voice he shouldn't have been able to hear. "Valcua did it. We've got no earth, water, fire, or air. But this might be your best chance. Even without a Glencalibur, you of all people could probably do it."

It was unclear what D thought of that inaudible voice, but he raised his blade. Watching over him was nothing save the pitch-black void of space and the stars of the Milky Way a thousand light-years distant.

D's eyes were ablaze, burning with the color of blood. Not saying a word, D swung his right arm. Simultaneously, his lungs exploded.

The last scrap of the sun stained the distant plain a deep red as it sank, and when it was gone, Matthew's lips twisted into a grin. Valcua's will still remained in his brain, and it was telling him what he should do next. It wanted him to take command of all the members of the survey party, and it must've had some way of making that

possible. The destruction of the guardroids and all information pertaining to the survey party had been hidden from Braujou. The computer was fed data that suggested Sue had gone out on an ordinary walk.

Before Braujou awakened, the boy was to go outside and use Valcua's will to bully the survey-party members into servitude. He had no instructions beyond that.

Getting out of the vehicle was easy. Everything was controlled by the computer, and as long as the computer was fooled, they could do whatever they wished—this was undoubtedly the doing of Valcua's will. All the boy had to do was reach for the doorknob, and it simply unlocked. The reason he'd had Sue ask Braujou for permission to go outside during the day was because they wanted things to appear as normal as possible.

Today, he'd made a lot of progress in brainwashing Sue. The day when his foolish younger sister would become a vassal of Grand Duke Valcua couldn't be far off.

Taking care to muffle the sound of his footsteps, Matthew ran toward the survey party and opened the door to the same vehicle they'd entered before. He was greeted by glowing red eyes and hungry fangs.

"It's a human being."

"A human!"

Their voices, now nearly those of beasts, crept through the darkness that held sway over the vehicle's interior.

"Don't get worked up, now!" the boy said, sounding worked up himself. He'd noticed that the group was looking at him as nothing but prey.

The men stopped. Already clinging to the walls and ceiling, their pale hands reached out for Matthew from above and below.

"I've received instructions from Grand Duke Valcua. I have a matter to discuss with you," said the boy.

"What kind of . . . matter?" one of the fiends asked as they looked at each other.

"From this day forward, all of you will become servants of Grand Duke Valcua."

"Oh—and who the hell is that?" another one asked.

Matthew became furious. "You bastards have become creatures of the night and you don't even know the grand duke's name? What idiots! I'll have to punish you immediately for your insolence."

"Ha, ha, ha!" one of them laughed loudly. "Ha, ha, ha . . . Oh, ho, ho, ho!"

Suddenly his voice and its laugh became that of a woman. Matthew was stunned—not by the strangeness of this, but by the fact

that it sounded familiar.

"But—but you're . . ."

"How pathetic are the creatures known as humans."

Now Matthew understood.

From behind the pale-faced men, a Noblewoman in a white dress suddenly took shape.

"How foolish of you to forget me or my name—but before I punish you for that, you would do well to remember me. I am Duchess Miranda." Walking easily through the cramped vehicle toward the speechless Matthew, the lovely Noblewoman added with a haughty laugh, "And these men are my servants, one and all. I won't allow them to be commandeered."

A pale hand reached out.

Perhaps it was due to Valcua's will that Matthew was able to jump through the door. Nearly tripping over his own feet, he backed away five or six steps before bumping into a thick tree trunk and stopping.

The pale Noblewoman and her men alighted from the vehicle. Red embers glowed in the darkness.

"Where are you going? Didn't you come here to scout my underlings?" Miranda called out to the boy.

"Quite an interesting discussion you're having," said a voice that called to mind a lion's roar, raining down on Matthew from the tree above him. The voice resembled Count Braujou's.

Just as the boy was about to bound away, he was snagged by the collar and hoisted high into the air, giving him a panoramic view of the wasteland.

"I have only one thing to say to you," Count Braujou informed Matthew in a tone that crushed down through the night as the boy dangled from the Nobleman's hand. "I've been following every move you've made. I also know that Valcua's brain is inside yours. The only reason I gave you free rein was to learn what you were plotting. I was going to let you run a bit more, but unfortunately the situation no longer allows that. I may have to get rough, but I shall show you things through something other than Valcua's eyes. Miranda, would you be so good as to overlook the commandeering incident?"

"I suppose I can, given our relationship." When she spoke, Miranda smiled in such a manner it was plain she was hiding something. "In return, will you entrust me with the task of correcting the boy?"

For a second, hints of surprise and displeasure skimmed across that gigantic face, but they immediately gave way to a tremendous smile as the count replied, "I suspect you may prove a tad harsh, but they say the best medicine tastes the worst. I shall leave it to you."

“Let go of me!” Matthew shouted. “Let go! Let go of me now! I’m not plotting anything!”

“You don’t know when to give up. I suppose I could make you one of my followers, coarse as you are. I proposed that once already.”

“Do something to him that will make him wish you had instead. That should suffice.”

“Very well,” Miranda said, bringing a dainty hand to her lips and laughing haughtily.

It was at this point that Count Braujou looked up into the sky. A woman’s voice had just echoed in his ears, telling him, “Sue has escaped.”

“*What?*” the Nobleman bellowed, his words shaking the darkness and changing not only the expression Matthew wore, but those of Miranda and her lackeys as well. “How—how on earth did she manage that?”

“I’m terribly sorry. Some external consciousness forced my network to experience electronic hallucinations. It seemed as if she were in her room. Please forgive me.”

“No, this is unpardonable!” the giant roared, kicking at the ground. A great clod of dirt landed at Miranda’s feet. Matthew’s body followed it. “He’s all yours, Miranda. Work him over thoroughly, and leave him *purely human* again. I’m going in search of the girl.”

Sue raced blindly across the steel plain that stretched on without end. Though it was level ground and she was running, she was still just a girl on foot. There was only so much distance she could cover. And she would be exhausted long before that.

Sue ran on calmly. Another personality had slipped into her head, and it seemed to have altered her metabolic functions. She could keep running forever—and Sue glowed with joy.

There was only one reason why she’d fled Count Braujou’s car: Matthew had been caught. It was only a matter of time before his brainwashing of Sue was uncovered. Therefore, Matthew had instructed her to flee if it came to that.

In just a single day, Sue had been brainwashed to an incredible degree. She had complete confidence that she would escape. As evidence of this, she had only to look at the countless pale lights ahead, rolling toward her like a cloud of smoke. To her rear there was the sound of an engine. And that was far closer.

Never giving up, she kept moving, but the girl mouthed a prayer that was both unthinkable and impossible: “Help me, O great Valcua!”

It was at that instant that a streak of light from the sky struck the car. The girl’s eyes were seared as midday sprang to life in the darkness of night, and when they finally regained their sight, what

they found was the halted vehicle trapped in a pale-blue cage of electromagnetic waves.

Her relief gave her the strength to run as the source of the glowing points—cylinders each equipped with a single yellow eye—swept by her, their innumerable tentacles swaying back and forth all the while. Having no time to watch what transpired between them and the car, Sue ran for all she was worth, but then her body rose into the air without warning. One of the cylinders had used a trio of tentacles to scoop her up before shooting off for the far reaches of the plain at incredible speed.

Sue smiled.

Who could've predicted it would come to this? The same girl D had defended, Braujou had rescued, and Miranda had protected was now all too happy to run headlong into a deadly trap.

Her fears forgotten during the smooth flight, Sue began to drop off to sleep. Suddenly, she was violently jostled by a series of tremors. When she opened her eyes, they were filled with the rapidly approaching ground.

Dropping at a sharp angle, the cylinder barely managed to regain its composure and glided down to the steely terrain. It was faithful to its duty to the very last, setting Sue down on the ground after it came to a stop.

Escaping the tentacles as they opened, Sue was wary of possible explosions as she moved away, watching the fallen cylinder and the bizarre tree that towered behind it.

A woman stood between the cylinder and the tree. Her lips pursed the tiniest bit, and the faint humming that came from them like a night breeze crept into Sue's ears.

"You're—"

"Callas the Diva," the bewitching singer said by way of introduction.

"Why—why did you do this?" She was talking about the cylinder. As far as Sue was concerned, both of them were on the same side, acting on Valcua's wishes to return her to his castle.

"Bringing the two of you back to the grand duke is *my* job. It's hardly something to entrust to an android."

At this point, Sue could've been considered one of Callas's compatriots. Yet as the beauty closed on her in her alluring manner, it was true and undeniable horror that paralyzed Sue.

III

Halting but a step away, Callas arched one willowy eyebrow a bit as she stared at the girl.

"You're smiling, aren't you? Is there something funny about this? Are you having a good time?"

"It's okay now," Sue replied. "I don't have to be afraid of any of you anymore. I'll be happy to go see the grand duke."

Sue's face was colored by a strange glow. The girl's complexion reflected the gleam Callas's eyes gave off as she stared at Sue.

Letting all the tension drain from her body, she smiled at Sue. "And to what do we owe this change of heart, I wonder?"

"My brother—Matt told me all about it. All about the grand duke's vision, and about how wonderful his world is. It all made such great sense."

Sue's voice was level, her tone smooth—like she was conversing with a friend.

Turning her eyes toward the ground, the diva said softly, "Is that so? That's wonderful. Now, would you be so kind as to listen to what I have to say, too?"

"Sure—but out here?"

"Yes. Out here."

"Okay, let's hear it."

Tilting her head a little to one side, Callas began to speak.

Off in the distance, the androids and Count Braujou were probably locked in deadly battle.

"Five thousand years ago, my mother was a soprano in an opera troupe that traveled the Frontier."

The people who dwelled on the Frontier were positively starved for recreation. The Nobility had their grand parties and balls, but the people had only seasonal festivals and troupes that traveled from village to village to relieve the depression and tedium of their daily lives. One of the divas of that nameless opera troupe was Callas's mother, and on a visit to a remote village, she caught the eye of Valcua, who gave her a rather insistent invitation to visit his manse. At the time, Callas was only three years old, yet she was already quite popular and the highest soprano in the troupe.

"From that day forward, my mother and I remained at the grand duke's mansion. I heard the rest of the performers had been handsomely paid and sent on their way—it was only much later that I learned they'd all, in fact, been slain. The grand duke preferred our voices to our blood. Every night, he would listen, enraptured, to mother and me singing. In starkly moonlit gardens, in great halls that held only the three of us, in the grand duke's bedroom. But the passage of time that was meaningless to him was an all-too-apparent foe to us. The wrinkles were multiplying on my mother's face, and her singing voice was losing some of its zing. In time, all that would

remain for us was the same fate the rest of the troupe had met. Day by day, my mother grew thinner and weaker, perhaps because she could read the grand duke's fickle mind more plainly than anyone. When we found favor with the grand duke, we seemed to frolic in heaven. But the knowledge of the fate that awaited us was more than my mother could bear. And so she came up with a proposal to ensure the grand duke's opinion of us wouldn't change."

As the mother's beauty and voice faltered, Valcua shifted his affection to Callas, whom she'd raised into a beautiful jewel of womanhood. The first night her mother had entered Valcua's mansion and sworn she would sing for him alone for the rest of her days, she'd extracted a promise from the grand duke. He was never to give the kiss of the Nobility to Callas. She must've been filled with mettle and maternal love when she struck that bargain.

"Please keep my daughter and me with you—me until I die, and my daughter forever more," her mother had suggested.

Twenty years had passed.

"One night, the grand duke crept into my bedroom and gave me the kiss."

However, it was a strange phenomenon that awaited Callas. She didn't thirst for blood or loathe the sunlight. She didn't even succumb to madness like so many other victims.

As she wallowed in her despair, Valcua told her, "I'm able to do incredible things. I alone. You will not be my servant, but you will live so long you shall forget all about your human life. However, it won't be forever, and you shall require the aid of some unholy devices. In return, your voice shall have a power more wondrous than any song that ever came from a human throat."

Presently her mother died, and Callas buried her with all due ceremony. Afterward, Callas continued her days in peace, elegance, and unimaginable loneliness.

All that came to an end about a hundred years later, the instant the grand duke decided to fight the Sacred Ancestor. Whether it was during his deadly conflicts with fellow Nobles or in the universe-spanning war against the aliens, up until that point there hadn't been a time when Callas wasn't by the grand duke's side, filling the air with her song. However, the opponent the grand duke now faced wouldn't offer him even a moment's respite. One after another, Valcua's vassals were slain—struck down by assassins. In response, the grand duke selected seven of his strongest retainers for a new unit that would guard him against assassination. Callas was chosen to be one of them due to the power of her song.

"I don't know how many Nobles or humans my songs brought death to. Those were not pleasant days."

At some point, Callas had circled around behind Sue. Though her hands rested on the girl's shoulders and a breath like ice blew over her lobe and into her ear, Sue wasn't scared. She was one of them now.

The second that breath became a song, an acute pain shot through every inch of the girl, for Callas had just sung, *Pain, make your rounds*.

"Stop it! Why are you doing this?"

Sue tried to escape, but she was held in place with fiendish might as Callas whispered to her in a normal voice, "There's something I'd like to ask you. How do you think I feel about the grand duke?"

"That's silly . . . Surely you must love such a—"

"I hate him," Callas said softly. "The man who turned me into a killer, the man who forced a merciful mother to sell out her own daughter, the man who never noticed my love for him, or if he did notice never returned even an iota of those feelings—what else could I do but hate him?"

Now revealed, the emotions that had smoldered in her heart of ice bore down on Sue like a wildfire.

"I thought you were just like me," Callas whispered in the ear of the girl whose fears had been revived. "Thought you were like us in the old days—five thousand years ago. I thought you were a human scared of the Nobility and unable to do anything but scamper about. And as you fled, I thought you'd hate the Nobility more than anyone."

"That . . . was a long time ago."

Delivered in robotic fashion, Sue's reply made Callas grin.

"A long time ago? A long time, as in five thousand years? You were a foe of the Nobility until the day before yesterday! And all it took was some persuasion on the part of your older brother to make you love the grand duke—that I can't stand for. No matter what the grand duke may do to me later, I'm going to deal with you myself right here. Now, listen to my song."

The deadly words were borne on a melody that tried to fill the girl's trembling ear.

Just before it could, Callas felt a pall of terror take over her face and turned to look.

D was standing there. The hem of his coat fluttered in the night breeze that had just started to blow, and the handsome features reflected in his foe's gaze were enough to make even the moon pale in comparison. And then he began to walk toward Callas and Sue with bewitching strides.

Almost everything had been taken care of. Artificial lightning bolts of several hundred million volts hammered relentlessly at the car, and the androids' laser cannons blasted at Braujou and the survey party, but they didn't budge at all, meeting the attack with the weapons in

the car and monstrous strength, and in the blink of an eye their mechanical assailants had been reduced to scrap.

"Ha, ha! Valcua's stupid octopuses! Did they actually think they could do anything to Count Braujou's car?" the count jeered.

By his side, Duchess Miranda spat, "Octopuses? How uncouth."

This time, the beautiful woman had been the only one to refrain from fighting, but now she was out of the vehicle and looking over the sprawling android wreckage.

"Long ago, a battle this size would've left the entire plain reeking of blood, but now all that drifts in the air is the stink of melted circuits. What a lamentable age we live in."

"There are no survivors. Well, let's go look for Sue. Back to the car," Braujou told the former survey-party members, who bared their fangs.

But a second later, a strange phenomenon occurred. A gigantic, club-wielding arm reached out of empty space, and before anyone had even noticed it, the gale it whipped up had sent thuds and vermilion flying as half their number dropped to the ground with heads split open.

"Oh, who do we have here?" the count asked, sounding delighted.

After the five surviving survey-party members had fallen back, a crimson mist danced in space, and then a giant appeared from thin air.

After taking a glance at the bloodied club he carried and the animal hides he wore, Braujou asked, "You're Seurat, aren't you?"

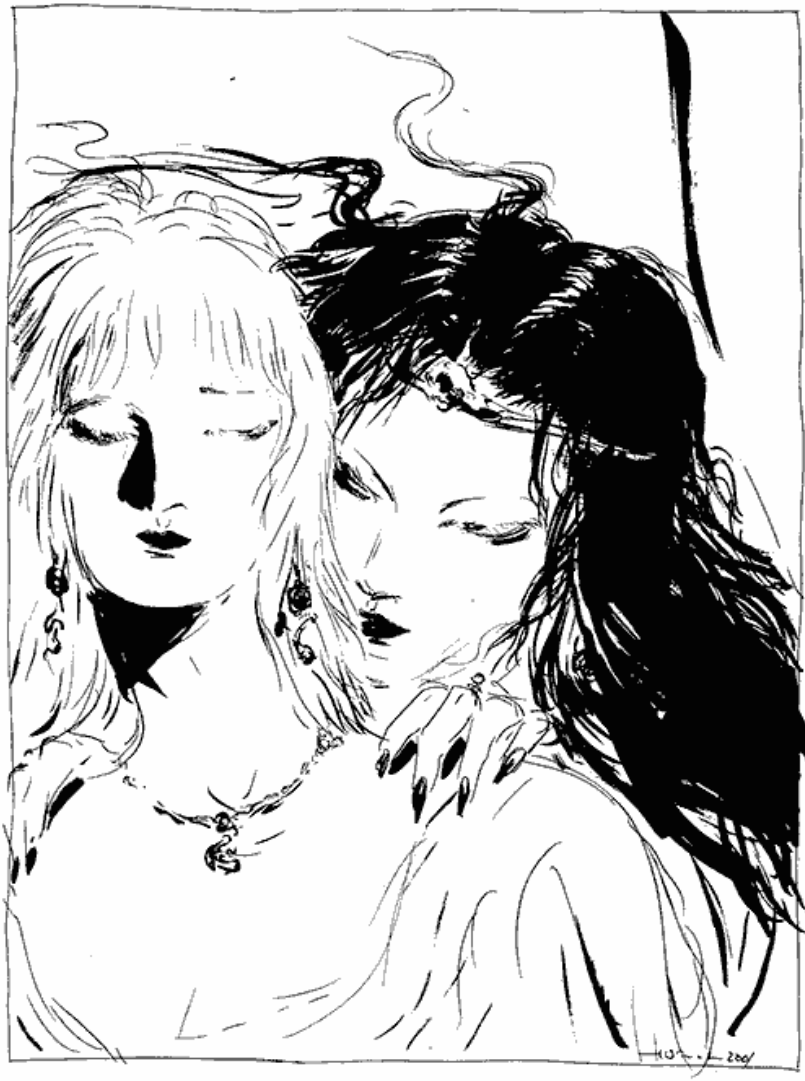
He just wanted to be sure.

One giant nodded to the other. "Indeed . . . I . . . am."

"If you're one of Valcua's seven, I can slay you now, and that will only leave the woman known as Callas. Now, to take care of another small fry . . ."

Whipping out his long spear, Count Braujou started to walk over to him.

"Have at you!"



The count made a jab with his spear. It was somehow gentle, and yet no one could've dodged it, and any attempt to parry it would've been knocked aside.

Batting the spear away with his club, Seurat pounced. After going about a yard, his body leaned forward and to the right, and with the club in his hand, he crashed back to earth about fifteen feet away. Seurat hadn't batted Braujou's spear away—he'd been sent flying, but it was unclear if the gigantic assassin understood as much. However, he used all the spring in his body to leap up and hurl his club at Braujou.

Sneering at such a simplistic and primitive attack, Count Braujou knocked it aside, and then leveled his spear for a second assault. But his spear wasn't there. Not realizing that all five fingers that had gripped it were broken, the count turned his gaze behind him and to the left. The look he gave to the weapon jabbed into the ground at an angle some twenty yards away was a strange one. He couldn't believe it. No other creature in the world had ever attempted to best him with pure brute strength and actually succeeded.

Hurrying over to his weapon, he pulled it out and aimed the tip of it at Seurat once more. The other giant had already assumed a stance. The count did likewise. Now, it wasn't electromagnetic waves that began to rise from the steely earth but rather a hunger to kill.

D brought his blade down on Callas's head.

The count's spear made a horizontal swipe toward the base of Seurat's neck.

Before a control panel in a strange laboratory, Valcua suddenly looked up into space.

At that moment, the entire plain was struck by a deadly gleam of blistering heat and crushing weight. The asteroid missile launched by a technician in the Capital had slammed into the earth's surface without warning.

A NEW SPECTER OF DEATH

CHAPTER 3

I

What would happen if an asteroid over one hundred yards in diameter traveled one hundred million miles to slam into the Earth's surface? Needless to say, the impact would probably flatten every building above ground, and the dust thrown up into the air would block the light of the sun. Mountain ranges would be erased, land would rise or fall, and even the shapes and locations of the very continents would be altered. And if the asteroid were to be purposely summoned by a human being, the fate that would await mankind after its impact would be nothing shy of courageous self-sacrifice. Rather than chalk this decision up to human ignorance about the consequences, it might instead be attributed to fear of the Ultimate Noble pushing them over the line. The Ultimate Noble was a terrifying being; they desired him dead so badly they'd allow themselves to be destroyed in the process.

The asteroid missile itself wasn't a weapon from battles between Nobles, but rather something that had been developed for the front lines in the war against the aliens. Such missiles came to number more than one hundred thousand, and it was said there'd even been plans to turn Pluto and Jupiter into weapons. Valcua had altered the space around the asteroid belt where these weapons floated, creating a kind of teleportation field. Using it, asteroids could travel to the far reaches of the Milky Way in an instant and inflict all the devastation anyone could ever desire. Using its quantum engines and control unit to adjust its angle of descent toward the target, it could strike Valcua's kingdom a scant thirty seconds after ignition. This time, it took the asteroid one day to reach the atmosphere. Something had gone wrong with the computer controlling the teleportation field over the great span of years.

Five hundred million tons of asteroid were moving at a speed of just over sixteen hundred feet per second when they slammed into the steel plain. However, the black-steel wasteland stretched out in the moonlight, not showing the slightest signs of devastation. Not even fragments of the asteroid lay on the plain as the wind blew dolefully across it.

"Asteroid AX2894006 disappeared a millisecond after making contact with the Earth's surface."

Valcua's ears caught Kima's floating voice.

"Although 99 percent of the shock wave and atmospheric anomalies were absorbed, I believe a small amount of its influence was unavoidable."

"The new government in the Capital?" Valcua inquired without any real interest.

"Undoubtedly."

"In retaliation, we shall burn ten million people alive later."

"Understood, milord."

After Kima's reply, Valcua returned to his bizarre task. He was taking the facilities and equipment that remained in his kingdom, consolidating them, breaking things down, and making them more powerful and dangerous—in order to get rid of D. He didn't for one second entertain the notion that the handsome assassin might've been destroyed by the likes of an asteroid strike.

The force of a sudden and violent gale carried D several miles and then dashed him against the earth. Quickly getting to his feet again, he turned his gaze into the still-blustering wind as a hoarse voice informed him, "We're two miles to the northeast. Sue and Callas both got blown to hell and back. Braujou's car probably did, too. So, what do we do now?"

Before it had even finished asking this, D started walking. Right back the way he'd come, to be precise.

His gait suddenly wobbled. Like a rag doll dancing in the breeze, the handsome Hunter fell flat against the ground.

"Did you use up all your strength coming back from the stratosphere? This ain't good at all," the hoarse voice said with some impatience. "Wind might be all we can get our hands on. Oh, if only we had some dirt!"

A tiny mouth opened in the palm of his hand, and the wind began whistling into it.

One minute passed. Two minutes.

"This is bad. Your heart's like ice. At this rate, it'll be impossible to repair your ravaged lungs—if I really wanted to take the roundabout way, I could do it with wind alone, but that'd take a whole day. What to do, what to do . . ."

The Hunter's black raiment fluttered in the wind.

"What's this?" it cried out in a small voice.

Off to their right—from the southeast—several points of light were approaching.

"Are those mechanized scouts? Oh, this could be trouble."

And then the sucking sound grew more ferocious—it might've actually given the Hunter's location away. As the glowing points headed straight for D, they seemed to move a little faster.

Something cold pressed against her forehead. Sue opened her eyes.

A familiar face was peering down at her.

"Don't move."

"You're—Seurat?" Sue was so surprised her body tensed, causing her to cry out in agony—or she would've, but she stopped. That would've required her to use her muscles. She was in pain.

"I've been following you . . . all along . . . Callas said to . . . so I've just been watching."

"Why didn't the two of you . . ." Sue was going to ask why both of them hadn't come after her together.

"One of us . . . to deal with one objective . . . At least, that's how Callas and I always did it . . . and still like to do it."

"I intend to see the grand duke."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah. I finally get it. I see where I have to go," Sue said, her eyes agleam. Her excitement was so great she moved her upper body, and then let out a cry of pain.

"You've suffered contusions all over your body. It's quite possible you've got internal bleeding. You shouldn't move for the time being."

"Hurry up and bring me to the grand duke."

"Wait," Seurat said, looking down at the girl. They were under the bizarre black tree.

"What is it?" Sue suddenly asked.

"What's what?"

"Why do you have that sad look in your eyes?"

"They always look that way."

"No, they don't. They were different before."

"They were different?" the giant said, smiling thinly.

He's got gentle eyes, Sue thought. And that was why she said, "You don't look like a killer."

"I wasn't always one. I wasn't, and neither was Callas."

"I heard all about her. But you—"

The giant's whole body seemed to shake as he shifted his position. Sue had thought he was standing, but his massive form had actually been sitting cross-legged all along.

"Callas told you about herself? In that case, I should probably do the same. Are you prepared to hear a boring tale?"

"Sure."

The giant brought his huge right hand down by Sue's face. He was pinching something between his thumb and forefinger.

"Open your mouth."

"What is that?" Sue asked, her brow crinkling with the sense of foreboding that assailed her.

"Don't worry; it's medicine. If you've got internal bleeding, this will suck it up. I couldn't do anything to harm you. You know that, don't you?"

This was the truth. While he'd been with Sue, this assassin hadn't raised his voice even once.

Sue opened her mouth. A soft mass went into her throat—just in time for her to swallow it. Suddenly it felt like a long string was in her esophagus, and it was working its way down further.

"Gross—what *is* this?"

Sue wanted to press her hands against her belly, but she was too scared to do so. Whatever the thing was, it dropped down to her stomach, and then suddenly she couldn't feel it anymore.

"It's a kind of bloodsucking bug that's common in the mountains where I used to live."

Sue was speechless.

"They enter a creature through its mouth and drink its blood, but in the case of humans they only feed on internal bleeding. Very useful bugs."

"And if I don't have internal bleeding?"

"Not to worry. You just have to go to the bathroom to rid yourself of it."

Sue looked up at the sky and cursed her own body. Suddenly, there was a great throb in the very center of her head. Her field of view faded to black, and then her vision immediately returned.

"How do you feel?" Seurat asked, and when the girl pointed to her head, he nodded. "You had a brain hemorrhage. You're lucky. It got in there and sucked it up for you."

"Got in there?"

"How the bug manages to do that is one of its trade secrets. It seems that after it dissolves a path through the brain, the bug regenerates it and leaves it the way it was before."

Sue wanted to ask how it did this, but then she gave up. The giant had said he didn't know.

"I think it'll take a while before it's done sucking everything up. Well, this is how my story goes . . ."

Seurat began his tale. In the distance, lightning flashed.

"A long time ago, people used to call me a mountain man."

Combing through her memories, Sue said, "I've heard of them. That must've been a really long time ago, huh?"

"A good five thousand years ago."

Back then, Seurat had lived in the heavily wooded depths of the mountains with his father. His mother had died young, and unable to endure the cruel elements, his siblings had all died as well.

"It was a hard life. We hunted mountain dragons, stone dogs, death bears, and the like to fill our bellies, stripping them of their hides so we could bring them to the huntsmen or woodcutters about once a year to trade for machetes, rifles, and ammunition—and on

and on it went. Sometimes we'd help a lost traveler or bring a huntsman, injured in battle with a serpent tiger, back down to the foot of the mountain. In those days, we got along with humans pretty well."

One day during the winter of Seurat's fifth year, a Noble suffering from a bad stab wound wandered into the cavern where the two giants lived. When he asked for their aid they had no reason to drive him away, and using feverbane grass and bloodsucking bugs to treat him, they had him nearly healed after a week.

Unfortunately, a group of human soldiers discovered them. They drove a stake through the Noble's heart on the spot, and because they'd helped him, Seurat and his father were shot.

"My father died, but I was saved when a cigarette case in my chest pocket stopped the bullet. The Noble had given it to me as a token of thanks for taking care of him. Among the people who pumped bullets into my father and me were a man from the village we'd often helped with his farm work, and a huntsman we'd brought back to his home when he was wounded and couldn't walk."

Even though that one bullet had missed his vital spot, the giant still lost one eye and had more than a dozen other bullets and rivets lodged in him. As Seurat lay on the ground unable to move, the fire died out, leaving him to freeze to death in the brutal cold.

But in his dreams a figure appeared, telling him, *The Noble you helped was a friend of mine who'd been attacked by humans. I shall give you immortal life. Become my servant and kill the lowly humans*.

Seurat thought it was just a dream that had come to him in his comatose state.

"Then, you mean to tell me," Sue began, turning a look of amazement toward the giant, "you still look just like you did as a child?"

The giant nodded.

"I've heard that mountain men age the same way human beings do. That's just too—"

"Only my appearance is that of a child. I've seen far too much," Seurat said wearily. "Much of life, and much of death. To be honest, I can't say I wouldn't like to go back to the mountains."

"But you're with the grand duke now, so you can . . ." Sue fell silent. He had that look in his eye again—a sad and mournful look. And his gaze was trained on Sue. She got the feeling she was terribly mistaken. And the only one who knew it was the giant in front of her.

"Seurat," she called out to him, but just then Sue caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye of a white fog drifting her way.

It can't be! Actually, it wouldn't be that strange. The night is her world, after all.

Before the girl had even finished these thoughts, the mist eddied, rippled, and took the form of a woman.

Seurat turned around.

"That's how we made an entrance in the old days. Do you have a problem with that?" Duchess Miranda asked from a spot not ten feet from him, white fangs poking from her vermilion lips.

Oh, what a turn of events! In Sue's present state, she found the hand the Noblewoman extended to aid her as loathsome as the misshapen paw of any supernatural beast.

The glowing points were the eyes of four beautiful women. Each wore a gorgeous dress as they surrounded D with the graceful movements of seraphim. A flush instantly rose in their paraffin-pale faces.

"How handsome . . ."

"Who knew there was such a man in this world?"

"It was worth leaving the castle for the first time in five millennia."

"We'll drain you dry."

The four of them looked at each other. Each was a raven-haired beauty beyond compare. But in the presence of D, they looked like hags.

"Who shall start?"

"The first of us to be made, naturally."

"In that case, that would be me," one of them said.

"In that case, that would be me," said another.

"In that case, that would be me," the third and fourth said in concert.

"Then—"

"—we shall do it together."

The four figures descended on D from all sides.

Was his left hand just going to ignore them?

All four of the beauties were sucked into D's body at exactly the same time.

II

Seurat got to his feet. The impression he normally gave was one of simple calm, but the unearthly air that radiated from his gigantic form now kept Sue from calling out to restrain him. She knew nothing she could say would make any difference. His opponent was Duchess Miranda—and he knew better than anyone how merciless the Nobility were with their foes.

"Valcua's seven—are you the last?" Miranda asked, licking her lips. "You needn't say a word now. You shall learn there is a Noble

greater than Valcua when you die."

The wind whistled against her face as Seurat's club ripped through the air. The shadowy figure took to the sky.

Sue instinctively looked up. With the moon's corona glowing around the duchess like a light she herself radiated, the beauteous woman wore a funeral shroud that was an even starker white. Watching her absentmindedly, Sue lay down like a slain Noble, while Seurat waved his club as if to break the Noblewoman's gaze.

Like a flower petal dancing on a wind sent by an angry season, Duchess Miranda sailed through the air to suddenly stand on the giant's shoulder. Seurat flailed his arms and twisted his body, but he couldn't knock her off. Miranda reached out with both hands, her fists gobbling up Seurat's hair as if they were alive, and then she tugged from side to side as if she gripped a pair of reins. She was like an accomplished rider breaking a wild bronco—but it became clear this rider was too rough with the reins as she relentlessly jerked his hair on one side and then the other, making Seurat's features contort with agony. What's more, a kind of ichor filled the air, raining down on Sue's face: blood, gushing from the roots of his hair.

He was one of Valcua's seven, an assassin among assassins, yet he seemed powerless against one of his master's fellow Nobles, with no opportunity to use his strange power to make things vanish. A moment later, the duchess's pale hands took two bunches of the giant's hair and tore them out by the roots. Dark blood covered the giant's head as he cradled it, writhing and screaming. When his back hit the ground she was on his shoulder, when his shoulder turned she shifted to his chest, and as Duchess Miranda relocated effortlessly, a glittering thread hung from her lips—saliva. The elegant beauty was now completely famished.

Her right hand struck the nape of Seurat's neck, at which point his body pitched backward and stopped moving. This Noble must've had incredible power to do such a thing to the same man who'd once fought off D. Her eyes giving off a red glow, her fangs gnashing, even her nails extending like the claws of a beast, the seductress grabbed the giant's remaining hair and yanked his head back. She could definitely make out the blue vein running through the nape of his neck. Letting out an inhuman howl of joy, the woman bit into the base of the giant's throat.

At that instant, a scream to split the heavens rang out. It streamed across the sky like a comet, coming back to earth some fifteen feet away.

"Wh—when did you learn to do that?" the Noblewoman snarled, her wide-open eyes bloodshot with madness, fear, and despair. "I can't allow you to live—even if I've sworn a blood oath, I can't let you survive with that knowledge. Little girl, from this moment forward I, Duchess Miranda, am your true foe!"

Shouted curses of a sort that threatened to drive her mad reverberated in Sue's brain as she covered her face with her hands, but aside from that the girl didn't move. Suddenly the shouts sounded a million miles away, and the form of the duchess seemed to become a blur, and then Sue saw a white mist moving off to the west. It was quite some time afterward that she managed to pull her arms apart. Of course, Sue didn't realize that when she'd shielded her face out of surpassing fear, her arms had formed a cross.

When the girl had stepped between the two of them, she had shielded Seurat behind her, and she now walked over to the giant and told him, "Hold on."

But by this point his body had already begun to quake violently.

From nowhere in particular, what sounded like weeping had begun to drift through the area. But it then became a sound that would make an impressionable young girl blush and cover her ears, even if she couldn't help but lift her hands a little to listen—moans of ecstasy. Feverishly twisting around each other like invisible flames, the moans quickly became the unmistakable sounds of women panting.

"Wonderful . . . No, this is so intense . . . I feel like I'm going to melt away!"

"Oh . . . I'm losing my mind . . . Going mad . . . I don't want your blood . . . Just take me . . . all the way!"

"Who . . . who in the world . . . made a man like this?"

"Help . . . Someone, help me . . . I can't take . . . any more . . . If he were to kill me . . . I wouldn't even mind it . . ."

All the voices came from within the prone form of D. With all the

lust and rapture they conveyed, the speakers must've wanted to die.

Like evils freed from Pandora's box, four pale figures floated into the sky. Three of these resembled white ghosts wrapped in something like black hair as they fell to the ground and moved no more. One remained. But the raven-haired woman's face and body were half-melted, and she trailed strings of mucus in vomitous hues as she madly tried to get closer to D.

"How horrible . . . Up until five thousand years ago . . . we were the Succubus Squad . . . feared by demon and monster alike . . . free to drink the blood and seed of the lowly humans when we pleased . . . but to be done in like this . . . by an unconscious man, in a sleep like death . . ."

As she murmured this, the woman was the one who sounded like a corpse. From the waist down she'd dissolved completely, yet she was still hell bent on clinging to D, thanks to a vindictiveness that ran in the marrow of her bones—or perhaps it was because of something her body felt that made her mouth open and close like that of a fish between incessant cries of D's name. Her left eye dangled from the optic nerve, her nose caved in, her lips split . . . but the expression that remained on her face was the heart-wrenching joy of a woman going to the man she loved. Literally melting away in body and soul, this woman wanted nothing more than to be with D.

"My three companions . . . are dead . . . I alone remain . . . You are all mine . . . The least you can do . . . is take me to heaven . . . with you . . ."

When she reached D's chest, the woman looked down and caught her breath. Her face turned up again. Every tooth in her mouth had become a fang. As she was just about to go for D's windpipe, a stark flash angled up to the woman's throat. Her remaining eye flew up high, along with the rest of her head, catching a view of bright blood shooting out from the stump of her neck.

Setting the knife on the ground, D's left hand drank the blood with its palm.

"Water and wind are covered."

A tiny mouth opened in the bloodied palm, and then even tinier eyes joined it.

"Don't have enough earth and fire. But we'll have to give it a shot."

The moment of truth passed. Moonlight made the night wind glitter on the steely plain, and after a moment of stillness the faint emotions of man and woman flared up and burned out. What remained then? Until a new drama of life and death began, only the moonlight and the wind.

“Lord Valcua!”

The Ultimate Noble, slouched in a chair, turned his head when he realized it was Kima who called him, but immediately faced forward again.

“I’m still making my preparations. I shall brook no interference,” he said in a voice like a rumbling from the earth.

“It’s the four members of the Succubus Squad sent out on reconnaissance—they’re believed dead,” Kima replied. While all the others communicated via holographic images, he alone spoke to Valcua directly.

“I know. This is *my* kingdom. It must be the work of D.”

“Indeed, milord.”

“So, he used the same trick that I used to come back from the depths of space? This man begins to worry me more and more.”

“Given it’s him, that’s not surprising.”

“That’s right,” Valcua said, turning around. “After all, this is a man you once served. When he exited the labyrinth, I believed I’d taken the full measure of his power and constructed a perfect duplicate of him. We then fought.”

“I see—and how did it go?” Kima asked, his curiosity seemingly piqued. He leaned forward without realizing it.

“We were basically even. I drove Glencalibur through his chest, and his blade pierced my heart. That sensation—well, I wouldn’t call it pleasant. Were we to actually fight, the result would probably be the same. In which case, I would lose.”

Kima was speechless.

“But I can’t accept that. The Ultimate Noble is fated to be eternally victorious. Kima, there’s something I shall share with you alone.”

“What is it, milord?”

“Something a man told me in a dream. *Only in a time of absolute peril will I allow you to make use of a certain weapon. It’s concealed in the far reaches of an extradimensional dungeon, and only when you truly desire it will you receive the key that unlocks it.*”

“What is it? And who was this man in your dream?”

“I don’t know either of those things . . . All I know is that it was a man. I get the feeling I saw his face, saw his form, yet I can’t remember anything. Perhaps it was just a dream of a dream. There was just one thing . . .”

“One thing?” Kima said, the words falling hard against his chest.

“Behind him stretched a wasteland—a plain so desolate that in my dream, I felt from the very bottom of my heart I should never

want to set foot on it. That was where he'd come from."

Valcua raised his right hand. A golden card trembled between his fingers.

"And that—is it the key?"

"A short time ago, I suddenly found it sitting in my lap. I don't know where it came from or who brought it here. Not even *I* know, here in *my* kingdom, of all places."

"And your time of absolute peril . . . might that refer to D?"

"I don't know, but I assume so."

"Why, that's . . ."

Taking his eyes off his master, Kima surveyed their surroundings.

Walls towered over them like a mountain range, their summit out of sight. As for the ceiling—there probably was one. The walls themselves were so far away, the place so vast that it left any who entered it feeling utterly alone. It hardly seemed right to call it a room.

Kima didn't know everything there was to know about the kingdom. Only Valcua did. But even as he reminded himself of this fact, he had to wonder why a black anxiety still bubbled up in him.

Where were they?

"Here it is," said Valcua. His face had a pale glow.

Though Kima tried to remember what had been across from where he was seated, he had no luck. There was only light. From the depths of it came something that was unfamiliar to Kima. Not even Valcua knew what it was.

The black-steel world had an endless white glow.

D was aware of the change that had come over Sue. He'd overheard her exchange with Callas. If she was still okay, she'd undoubtedly be headed for Valcua's castle. In which case, he'd go there too. He would defend the Dyalhis children—that was the contract he had made with their mother.

There was no sign of anything moving on the plain, which slumbered in the moonlight.

D was headed north. He was less than two miles from the spot where he'd been revived. Far up ahead of him, what looked like a vast construction site came into view. It was full of titanic devices that loomed far overhead, all working silently. Though they weighed thousands or even tens of thousands of tons, these machines didn't make a single sound.

"I don't get it. What are they doing?" the left hand asked. Its question was perfectly reasonable.

There were three enormous machines. They resembled derricks that were over one thousand feet tall. There was nothing at all in the

center of the triangle they formed.

Just then, a crack raced through the black ground exactly in the center of the triangle. Quickly spreading wider, it discharged the energy stored inside it.

"This ain't good—it's headed this way! Run for it!"

The surging torrent of light roared like a raging river as it flowed around the bases of the massive machines, then downstream—plowing toward the plain where D stood.

"There's a hill over there. Hurry!"

The Hunter's left hand pointed off to his left, where a slight rise curved up like a wart on the earth. D dashed, the wind swirling in his wake. Behind him, the roar of the light could be heard.

"We're not gonna make it in time!"

The instant his left hand shouted this, D made a bound. That one leap took him one hundred feet. It placed him halfway up the steep slope, and on landing D kicked off the ground once more to land on the summit.

Watching the roaring waters of light after they crashed against the foot of the hill, the left hand commented, "Over there—is that something spinning?"

Though the flow had already submerged the entire plain surrounding the hill, in the area just two hundred yards north of it something was revolving as the water pushed against it. Was that a waterwheel? It had to be at least three hundred feet in diameter. A waterwheel would turn the force of the water into energy for grinding flour or generating electricity—but there was no sign of any structure for doing either. Who was using this enormous source of energy?

To the Hunter, the colossal, derricklike structures seemed like lofty turrets that stretched before him without end.

"Incredible! They're moving, but they don't make a sound. Are they building something, or tearing something down?"

Seurat replied, "I've never seen . . . these machines before . . . either. I don't really understand the things Lord Valcua does."

"The dimensional embankment in the eastern wasteland has collapsed," Kima said.

"I know. That place is an utter mess. The collapse is probably completely natural."

"You mean you're not responsible for it, Grand Duke?"

"Ah—regretfully, no," Valcua replied, waves of terrible curiosity sweeping through his eyes. "Who would cause a minor embankment like that to collapse, and toward what end?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Kima replied.

Just then, the synthesized voice of a machine echoed overhead, saying, “The prisoner has escaped from the gravity-field dungeon.”

“*What?*” Valcua exclaimed, his cheeks quaking. The person he’d locked in the dungeon was allegedly the only thing that could save him in his hour of direst peril.

“Help!”

Mixed with the roar of the waters that had climbed halfway up the hill, the cry still reached D’s ears. The voice was Sue’s. He could tell what direction it came from.

D focused his gaze. About five hundred yards away, on the top of a low rise that was just coming under siege by the water, he could make out two figures: Sue and Seurat. Perhaps having already thought of a way to rescue her and slay him, D began to walk toward the summit of the hill, but then he halted as if lightning had just shot through him and looked around.

“What the hell was that?” the hoarse voice said dazedly, its tone choked with amazement. “Where is it?”

By the time his left hand was done speaking, D had turned his gaze from the summit of the hill to the gigantic machines. Beyond the erupting waters of light, he could make out a figure. Dressed in silver, form-fitting garments, he had a wonderfully defined physique. His features were filled with grace. Of particular note were his long, thin eyes and his lips. He was every bit as beautiful as D.

However, D’s eyes were far colder, and a certain memory seemed to linger in them. Feelings meant nothing to this man. His own parents could die right before his eyes and still he would feel no sadness. Not even if they were murdered. Not even if he killed them with his own two hands.

The figure in the silver tights stuck his right arm out parallel to the glowing water. With it he gripped a twisted iron rod. Muttering something, the man stuck the end of the iron rod into the water. A single plume of light reached up to the heavens. It was water.

The raging torrent became a foot-thick column of water being sucked into the sky. The flow on the ground ran toward the column. It was impossible to say how fast it moved, but the black surface of the ground quickly became visible again. The glow that gushed up from beneath the machines floated up to heaven, draining the area in less than two seconds.

“Damn, he’s good,” the left hand remarked with amusement. “He’s chock full of energy. He’s gotta have the power to conceal it, but from the way he just puts it out there for the world to see, I wonder if he was born recently?”

“One of Valcua’s?” D murmured.

“No doubt about it. But I don’t understand. The power this guy oozes—it’s just like yours. I’d tell you to stay on your toes, but you’re not one to heed advice—anyway, watch out. You should avoid contact with him. Hey!”

D was in the air. He’d made a massive leap from the hill.

Sue thought her blood would freeze. Seurat was left so weak, being surrounded by water seemed like a vacation by comparison. The wounds Miranda had dealt the giant sapped his strength with a speed that horrified Sue. If she didn’t do something, he would die—and that only firmed Sue’s resolve to go see Valcua with him.

They’d come this way because Seurat had told her, between agonized breaths, that there was a construction site nearby. According to the giant, projects aimed at reinforcing the grand duke’s kingdom, rather than expanding it, had continued throughout the five millennia from the time of his banishment until his territory was put back in place. Since artificial life forms and human laborers had been used in the old days, things like lodgings and medical facilities had been established for them, and they remained operational even now.

After walking all night, they’d finally arrived at the construction site. They saw the facility there, too. A trickle of joy began to flow through Sue’s utterly exhausted body—and it was immediately followed by the great deluge.

She thought it was a miracle that they were up on a plateau when it began, but in the blink of an eye the snarling torrent was ready to swallow the helpless pair. And then, there’d been another miracle. The deadly waters had all vanished into the sky.

As Sue looked around in disbelief, her eyes caught a silvery figure standing at the source of the stream.

Who’s that?

He also noticed them. As she watched his approach, Sue was filled with equal parts fear and anticipation.

THE TRINITY THEORY

I

Sue!" a faint voice called out raggedly at her feet. "Help me up."

Seurat had also noticed the strange character closing on them.

"No, you're in no shape for that. He's not necessarily our foe. We should assume he's one of Lord Valcua's servants."

Sue was still brainwashed. The young man in silver was crossing the trench the current had carved. It certainly seemed safe to assume anyone who drew breath in Valcua's domain was one of his vassals.

"He's not," Seurat said, but Sue found this denial difficult to accept.

"But he's—"

"I've . . . never seen him before. No one in his service . . . looks like that."

"That can't be!" Sue exclaimed, staring stupidly at the man, who'd finished climbing up the plateau to stand before them.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Seurat. His gigantic form had risen to its feet.

The man tilted his head to one side. His demeanor suggested not so much that he didn't understand the question, but rather that he didn't understand the words themselves. His mannerisms were so strangely childlike they left Sue perplexed.

"My name's Seurat. I'm in the service of Grand Duke Valcua. As you're in his domain, I take it you know who that is, right?"

"Val . . . cu . . . a?" the man murmured. His features, handsome enough to rival D's, suddenly changed.

Seurat gasped in astonishment.

The man who stood there wore Valcua's face.

"But you—I mean, milord is . . ."

Even realizing it was a duplicate, Seurat couldn't help but speak respectfully to anyone wearing Valcua's face.

The man—Valcua Two for lack of a better name—raised his right hand in a rather nonchalant gesture. In it he held an iron rod.

"Stand back, Sue," Seurat said, reaching out one mighty arm to grab her by the collar and pull her back.

The rod the other man had swung had vanished into thin air. Down at Sue's feet, a thick, curving line had been drawn.

Valcua Two drew back his right arm with a strange look on his face. His rod reappeared.

Seurat stepped forward. Not only did the right hand that gripped his club quake, but the rest of his body did as well. It was like the palsy of a dying man. That he'd made it this far was a miracle.

Any attacks from outside the ring would vanish, while those from within it would have the desired effect. That was Seurat's special ability.

The second Seurat tried to thrust his club, the man with Valcua's face brought his iron rod down. Seurat's right shoulder made a strange sound. Sue saw that the man's rod had gone halfway through it.

The weapon hadn't vanished.

Suddenly the right half of Seurat's body disappeared. Staggering, the giant turned to face Sue. His boulder of a face was etched with a look of great sadness, as if begging her forgiveness.

"I'm so sorry."

And then he collapsed inside his own ring, sending a rumble through the ground.

As Sue clung to the enormous figure, Valcua Two looked down at her with a vacant expression. There wasn't a trace of pride in the power he'd wielded, or contempt for his foe, or even pity for the dying. Still looking down at Sue, he stood unmoving for a few seconds, and then suddenly he reversed his grip on the iron rod—wrapping his left hand around it too—and raised it straight up in the air.

The man made a smooth stride forward. Even though he entered the ring, he didn't disappear. If he brought the rod straight down, it would take Sue right through the nape of the neck.

Valcua Two didn't take aim. He swung his weapon artlessly.

At that moment, a second miracle occurred. With impeccable timing, Sue slipped to the right. The rod pierced her left shoulder. A heartbeat later Sue realized what had happened, and a scream escaped from her mouth. Her left shoulder and arm had vanished.

Something like fine, gray dust clouded the air for a second. The iron rod was pulled back out.

A second upset awaited her. With no emotion showing on his face, Valcua Two brought his rod down. It stopped halfway. His left side had a sword sticking out of it.

Valcua Two spun around. The blade had slashed into him at an angle, and he left it there as he turned and saw D behind him.

"Valcua?"

Although the hoarse voice spoke in a surprised tone, the young man was expressionless, with looks so good they'd shake a stone.

"No, it ain't him. I don't know his name, but he's got spunk."

They were dealing with someone who had Valcua's face. It would have been hard not to comment on it.

D removed his sword. Valcua Two's hand grabbed hold of it. The blade sliced through the man's fingers, but they didn't fall off. His wounds closed instantaneously. The first blow hadn't been a thrust,

but rather a horizontal slash that had started at the right side of the base of his neck.

"Your sword ain't working," the hoarse voice said.

Valcua Two's eyes looked vacantly in its direction. A silvery flash zipped through the middle of his neck, then immediately faded. His head should've gone flying—but it remained right where it belonged. The palm of his right hand rested against the top of his head. The instant D's blade had passed through him, Valcua Two had held his head down with lightning speed.

As the man squared off against that Hunter of heavenly beauty, behind him Sue groaned, "D . . ."

"D," Valcua Two said, his expression changing as he spoke the name.

"I'll be!" the hoarse voice exclaimed with admiration.

The man who now stared at D was another D.

A glint of black raced out, and a silvery flash met it. The instant the iron rod and the sword came together with a dull thud, the rod was chopped in two. At the same time, D was sent flying backward.

"D," murmured the man who wore D's face. He stroked his features. His fingertips seemed to quake more from curiosity than from fear.

"D . . ." he murmured once again, and he started walking into the ring Seurat had made. His body disappeared, and then reappeared on the opposite side of the ring.

"D," he mumbled as he climbed down the plateau, and D climbed back up immediately. The Hunter halted, his upper body trembled, and then he spat up blood. Valcua Two—or rather, the man who now wore D's face—had been so powerful that he'd ruptured the real D's internal organs.

"Sue comes first," the left hand reminded D as his eyes turned to the man crossing the trench.

Bending down, D put his left hand against Sue's left shoulder.

"The surface of the wound has calcified. The problem now is shock. Her nervous system's all out of whack."

"Can you do anything for her?"

"Yeah, some first aid. The rest will depend on that facility over yonder."

D shifted his gaze from Sue's face. About a hundred yards to the left of the machines, he could see a lozenge-shaped building resembling a shooting star that had struck the earth. It had to measure well over one hundred yards by five hundred yards.

"It looks like it'd make patients a nervous wreck, but anything that size has gotta have medical facilities."

As the left hand had said, the vast complex was well equipped, containing an administrative center, living quarters, and medical facilities. D carried both Sue and Seurat, and when he came to the closed door, he merely had to press his left hand to the wall to get it to open. The facility's systems for eliminating foreign objects or guarding against intruders were overridden by D's blue pendant.

If people from the nearby villages could've seen the medical equipment, they probably would've wanted to work there, even if it meant serving as slave labor. The course of treatment selected for Sue and Seurat involved using nanomachines to reconstruct cells and skeletal structure. Medical devices that could operate on the scale of a ten-thousandth of a micron swiftly constructed artificial muscle and pseudobone in a manner akin to magic. Perhaps this was the alchemists' dream brought to life—creating something from nothing.

"It looks like Sue can be saved, but the big guy is pretty far gone," the Hunter's left hand said without even seeing the medical data displayed on the screen. It was possible the hand could read it through D's eyes. "That's a genuine Noble beating he took. He may have been one of Valcua's seven, but it looks like he was no match for a Noble after all. But it seems he was on pretty good terms with Sue. So what do we do?"

Her brain stimulated by something cold, Sue woke up.

D was standing beside her. She knew it was pointless to ask him questions as he put her in a magnetic hover chair and led her from her recovery room to the treatment center. Seurat lay on one of the operating tables.

"He won't last another five minutes," D told her softly. He made a gorgeous grim reaper.

Sue went over to the giant. The assassin had saved her. All the things she'd felt while on the road with him now came into sharp focus.

In Valcua's service, Seurat had lived five thousand years. But that life was now nearly at an end.

She didn't know what she should say. Remaining silent, she took the giant's hand. Larger and softer than she expected, his hand was terribly cold.

"Sue . . ."

The girl thought it was just her imagination. But she was certain she heard his next words.

"Don't . . . go . . ."

He might've been telling her not to go see the grand duke, or else pleading with her to stay by his side.

Pressing his cold hand against her cheek, Sue said, "I won't. I'm

not going anywhere."

Neither of them said anything after that, and a little more than five minutes later Seurat breathed his last.

"The asteroid missile was ultimately a dud," a voice reported. "What's more, there was no appreciable damage at the target site. It's as if the asteroid just disappeared along the way."

"If anyone could do that, it's the Ultimate Noble," replied a different voice. It was a man with a big diamond ring on his index finger. "It looks like there's nothing more we can do. Even the chief knows as much."

"When our ancestors fought against the Nobility, their only weapon was the patience to wait for morning. It's imperative that the human race never give up."

"Meaning?"

"If the asteroid missile failed, then use something that can't be stopped. If striking from the sky won't work, go through the ground."

There was a long pause—a period in which their fears fermented.

"You don't seriously intend to use *that*, do you? It could wipe out an entire continent! Why, have you even considered the collateral damage?"

"You think we didn't take that into account when we went with the asteroid missile?"

"I know, but that's—"

"There's no point in debating this any further. What we need now is time to act."

The decision was made. Regardless of the era, no matter what the situation, such decisions were always cold and calculated.

II

The D in silvery clothing headed further into the valley. Between cliffs of steel, a huge complex that seemed to be some sort of energy refinery appeared. Silence shrouded the grounds of the vast facility, and although nothing moved, the man could tell perfectly well that it was operational.

In a matter of minutes, the man stood in front of a building. The defensive systems that had let him come and go freely when he wore his *last* face now attacked him with all their might, but the devastator beams, gravity waves, and energy fields were all laid waste by one swipe of the iron rod the man carried. When the rod struck the wall of the building, the entire structure wavered like a heat shimmer and was then immediately wiped out of existence.

The man moved on to the next building.

“The Number Sixteen Energy Plant is being destroyed,” Kima reported.

Valcua opened his eyes. He lay on a sofa. Deep darkness filled his surroundings.

At present, it was daytime. The false darkness gained by simply turning off the lights was no guarantee that a Noble could act freely. Their actions were constrained solely to guard against their destruction by sunlight. By day, a Noble was stiff as a log, unable to move a muscle.

However, Valcua climbed off his bed, looked up in the air, and commanded, “Show me!”

A screen fifteen feet tall and thirty feet wide appeared on the ceiling, and on it was displayed the crumbling facility and the lord of destruction.

“Hmm. So, now he wears D’s face? Then I can see why he’d want to lay waste to my domain.”

“It appears his brain is under the control of D’s mind. If things continue like this, he might destroy every facility in your domain.”

Valcua stretched long and hard. “Coming at midday makes this somewhat inopportune, doesn’t it, Kima?”

“I agree completely, milord,” Kima said, his voice tinged with laughter. On witnessing such awesome destruction, his master’s reaction was equally impressive.

“Prepare my carriage!”

“If you like, I could bring you there immediately.”

Donning a grin that seemed to make the darkness freeze solid, Valcua replied, “The *mood* must be just right. Never forget that, Kima.” And then he left the room.

Ten minutes later, a carriage drawn by six steeds galloped out into the sunlight. Anyone who saw them racing along would’ve noticed how the carriage and horses were shrouded in an elliptical darkness that moved with them, leaving the wind swirling in its wake.

Half a day later, a dozen hooves kicked up sparks as the animals reared to a halt on the plain.

Up ahead, a lone figure was staggering forward. Though most of her face was bloodied and her white dress was charred and stained with gore, there was no mistaking Callas the Diva. Struck by the full force of the shock waves generated by the asteroid missile, the temptress had barely survived, and she was literally half-dead when she reached the vehicle.

The carriage door opened and a figure swathed in darkness stepped down to the ground. The longsword he gripped in his right

hand was none other than Glencalibur.

"Oh, it's you, Callas? What of the other six?" he inquired in a tone utterly devoid of compassion.

Going down on one knee, Callas bowed low. "With the exception of Seurat and myself, all the rest are gone."

"Seurat has also met his end. And you're not long for this world. Having failed in your task, you know what fate awaits you, don't you, Callas?"

"Will you not give me one last chance, milord?"

"No."

The diva toppled as the wind buffeted her. Her master's callous reply had robbed her of the last glowing urge to live.

"Rot here if you like, or make your own way to someplace no one will ever find and meet your end. Choose a way to die that will not bring dishonor to the name of Valcua."

And then the grand duke turned around, got back in his carriage, and raced past Callas in that unnatural darkness.

The wind played across her motionless body. Evening came and went, and darkness laid claim to the world. Cradling a single dying figure in its arms, the world kept its silence.

And then a voice called down to her, "Can you hear me, Callas?"

As her body didn't move a muscle, Kima bent down and touched her gently.

"The fate of an assassin who doesn't fulfill her orders is death—so it goes, but that punishment seems too cruel for such a woman."

Taking what looked like a syringe out of his long robe, Kima drove its point into the nape of Callas's neck. Ten seconds later, tremors ran through the lifeless body, and the faint sound of breathing flowed out into the silent world.

"Stay still. I've extended your life a bit, but it will soon be over. However, before it ends I'd like you to do something. I imagine you hate the grand duke."

Although he hadn't really required an answer, Callas moved her head to signal her agreement.

"Good enough. Come with me. Let the last of your energy be expended in a truly important act. It might just save the world."

Before Kima had finished speaking, he put his hand on the diva's shoulder.

The sound of the wind blowing was so faint in the area the two of them had occupied, it wouldn't have reached anyone's ears, and as darkness fell on the steel plain, there was no longer anyone there to hear it.

Somewhere in the distance a tune that sounded like electronic music could be heard. Matthew's face grew pale and he put all his strength into his legs, intent on getting as far away as he could.

When a sudden gale had knocked the car on its side, the boy had managed to escape from it while Valcua's will within his brain distracted the computer. Actually, Count Braujou had been about to perform a dangerous operation on Matthew's brain to rid the boy of this influence. In order to power that procedure, the count had needed energy from more than just the car's nuclear reactor—he required an outside source. That was the torrent D and Sue had encountered. It appeared when Braujou and Miranda had used their powers to locate an aquifer and stimulate it.

The boy had succeeded in convincing Sue of Valcua's greatness. They were supposed to escape together, but things didn't always go smoothly in the real world. Now that he'd finally been given the chance, it was only natural that Matthew was hurrying forward for all he was worth.

The next thing he knew, he was surrounded by darkness. Occasionally, there were blue flashes of lightning in the distance—but Matthew couldn't see them.

"What the hell?"

As he looked around once more, his eyes found black peaks towering grandly in the darkness. Without even knowing it, he'd apparently wandered into a valley, and the realization gave Matthew a very odd feeling. He shouldn't have been so lost. Valcua was supposed to be in his brain, telling him the proper direction to

proceed, guiding the boy as surely as the earth's magnetism guided birds. With that to aid him, he never should've strayed into the valley.

"What's going on? Did someone else lead me here?"

Though he said these questions aloud, there was no one there to answer them.

Matthew kept on walking. Suddenly he noticed something.

I shouldn't be going this way, he thought. *Gotta get out of the valley*.

But he kept right on walking. Even now he could feel himself moving *down* the sloping terrain.

The answer came to him in a flash. He was under the influence of what they called a *tailer*—a variety of monster Grand Duke Valcua had scattered throughout his domain to "welcome" intruders. Once this creature got behind someone, it could make them go wherever it liked; the person would either keep walking until they died of exhaustion or march back to its lair to be devoured.

"I don't care for either of those options," Matthew declared as he wildly dug through Valcua's knowledge.

What was the tailer's weakness? For some reason, he couldn't retrieve that information. The shock wave had caused him to hit his head against the car, but he didn't know if that had anything to do with it. He needed to do something.

Ignoring Matthew's misgivings, his legs continued working diligently, guiding him into the deep valley.

There was now a blue moon in the sky. A shadow fell at Matthew's feet. In no time his body was level with the road. Massive boulders surrounded him—but then, this was a world of steel. The boulders were all triangles, cubes, rhomboids, or other geometric figures. Matthew slipped in between them.

In a world of steel, a cave didn't just occur naturally. Everything was purposely constructed. The tailer's lair had probably been designed back when this domain was first established. The entrance to the steel cavern was in the shape of an oblong. About thirty feet in, it widened sharply on either side.

Matthew gasped.

He saw countless human bodies piled in the cave. Those on the very bottom were crumbling, bleached bones. About six feet up, they became shriveled mummies, which went on for another thirty feet. There must've been easily a thousand of them.

It doesn't eat the flesh. It just walks them until they're worn out, and then—

—and then it waited for the exhausted humans to rot here.

The boy felt a terrible fatigue rising in him from the soles of his feet. He was tired. All he wanted to do was rest.

Walking over to the mountain of corpses on unsteady legs,

Matthew planted a foot on one of the mummies. In a mindless manner he climbed. He couldn't control his arms or legs anymore. All he could do was climb. He put more power into his legs. One mummy's sternum snapped audibly.

Something like a scream rang out behind him. At that instant, strength flooded back into every inch of Matthew's body. Pulling his foot free, he turned around.

Behind him, a black figure contorted its body. It was a two-dimensional creature that looked just like a human being—but its chest was pierced by the tip of a long spear with a three-dimensional thickness and mass.

The shadow vanished in an instant. Only the spear remained. From its lengthy head down to its end was a good twenty feet. The gigantic figure who gripped it in one hand was nearly fifteen feet tall.

"You're nothing like your sister, you dolt!"

This heap of scorn was spat by none other than Count Braujou.

III

"Wh—what are you doing here?"

The first words to sputter from the boy's mouth were a perfectly natural reaction. Just as he was about to be fed to the wolves, a man-eating tiger had saved him.

"You were under the impression you'd escaped, but just to be safe, I'd sprayed a radioactive substance over you that would allow me to track you. The whole time you were walking I was following along less than five hundred yards behind. And I was well aware you'd fallen under the tailer's control. Now, get going!"

And saying this, the count thrust his spear into the mountain of mummies and skeletons. Matthew staggered and covered his ears, for although there was nothing alive there, a scream had rung out that no earthly creature could've made.

About halfway up the head of the spear, a life form with unusual limbs appeared as a kind of smoke that looked for a moment like it would leap at Braujou but quickly vanished.

"I've taken care of the tailer. Now go!"

As the despondent Matthew exited the cavern, the count said nothing, merely pointing to his car with his long spear. Heaving a sigh, the boy reached for the handle—and then the count looked up into space.

Flames of joy burned in Matthew's body. The night air had been blanketed with an incredible aura of the supernatural.

"Valcua?" the count murmured, gazing ahead—into the depths of the valley.

An unearthly air was coming—a demon. Even Matthew went pale.

At the end of the road, a human figure coalesced. Like fate, the voices of the count and the boy combined, calling out a single name.

"*D?*"

"No, it's not him," the count said, shaking his head.

Matthew realized that, too. D didn't wear silver tights. Nor did he carry an iron rod.

"So, he's got D's face and Valcua's aura, does he? This should be an interesting topic to research," the count said with a smirk, his fangs poking from his lips. "The question is . . . would fighting him be wise? Well, let's see!"

Suddenly catching Matthew by the collar, the count made an easy swing of his arm that hurled the boy at the man with D's face. His aim was perfect, and the boy landed on his rump at the man's feet.

The count's intent was clear. If this man were D—or rather, if he were an ally—he wouldn't lay a hand on Matthew. On the other hand, if he were someone loyal to Valcua, he'd most likely abduct the boy or kill him. Something seemed to have come over the count. Having sworn to defend Matthew at all costs, why did he then use him in an experiment like this?

"Ahhhhh!" the boy shrieked, trying desperately to get up again, but the pain in his tailbone wouldn't allow it.

D looked at Matthew blankly. In that dazed but radiant expression, something stirred. The iron rod went up.

Matthew shrieked again.

Rod still raised, the man with D's face walked forward.

"It would seem he's not our foe," Count Braujou said, and though his muscles relaxed as he gazed at the approaching figure, the glint in his eye made it clear he hadn't dropped his guard.

This strange D fearlessly advanced to about six feet from the count before halting.

"Who are you?" the count inquired. Though the tip of his spear rested against the ground, he had power and speed enough to raise it in a heartbeat and impale his foe if the need arose.

After some time, the man replied, "D."

"No, you're not. Your face may look exactly like his, but your build's different. However, the fact that you can duplicate his beauty so precisely makes you a most intriguing man. What's your connection to Valcua?"

The man said nothing.

"What in the—" the count exclaimed, suddenly raising his spear.

D's face had changed unexpectedly.

An impact with a force that seemed like it would knock the earth from its axis startled the count. The man had parried the blow with

his iron rod. And the face that grinned back at Braujou was that of Valcua himself.

"You—you freak!" the count exclaimed, swinging his spear around.

Still in the same stance as when he'd parried, Valcua Two was thrown high into the air by the Nobleman's monstrous strength. He was powerless to stop Braujou's spear from sinking deep into his flesh. The body that thudded to the ground was like a tiny insect struck down with an enormous stake. As he writhed on the ground, the spear also thrashed about wildly, whistling through the wind.

The sight was so grisly Matthew had to shut his eyes, while the count laughed, "That's a strange power you have, but while you're wearing Valcua's face, I can't allow you to live. I'll send you to the next life ahead of your master, so you can arrange a welcome party for him in hell if you like."

He looked at the man thrashing on the ground. And the man was looking at the count.

"What's this?" This time, it was a cry of unadulterated surprise that flew from the count's mouth. "Valcua's face, D's face—and now that of the Sacred Ancestor?"

So great was the count's astonishment, he didn't even turn when he heard someone say, "Incredible, isn't it, Braujou?"

When he finally did turn his gaze down the road the man had appeared on, he found a figure in a golden robe that glittered in the darkness. Every inch of the count's body readied for battle. Finally, he said, "Valcua! The real one, I take it."

"I needn't ask, Braujou, but I assume that as you've entered my domain, you're prepared to meet your fate."

With this remark, the golden robe flew up as his right hand raised Glencalibur, the longsword's gilded blade glistening in the moonlight.

And in response—a hint of turbulence stirred in Count Braujou's expression. His long spear was thrashing back and forth against the ground.

"Go ahead and get it, Braujou," Valcua said with a toss of his chin at the writhing figure. "But be careful. That man—"

Not listening to the rest, Count Braujou dashed over for his long spear. He reached for the shaft, but at that moment the spear disappeared, being driven instead through the giant's heart and out his back.

"Gaaaaah!" the count howled in unearthly agony.

"I told you to be careful," Valcua said to him with a smirk.

"Bastard! You lousy bastard!"

Spitting up blood, Count Braujou grabbed the spear with both hands. Though it was his own spear, the Nobleman couldn't make it

move an inch for all his prodigious strength. The reason was simple: another powerful hand gripped the shaft of the spear: the hand of the other Valcua.

No, look. There beneath the moon, the man's features shifted as if by some magical trick of that mysterious light—his face changing from Valcua's to D's, and from D's to another man's.

Forgetting his pain, Braujou stared intently at the visage.

"Why . . . why . . . are you here . . . milord?"

Little by little, a hue of incredible terror had begun to stew in the count's eyes.

"It can't be . . . Those other two . . . They couldn't be . . ."

Regardless of what the count might've suspected, he didn't get a chance to say it aloud. A golden god descended from the heavens—or so it appeared to Matthew. Leaping up to be framed against the moon, the Ultimate Noble brought his blade down on the gigantic Count Braujou, slicing from the right side of his neck clean through the left side of his torso in one stroke!

Amazingly, as his upper body started to slide apart, Braujou used his massive arms to pull the pieces back into place.

"Outstanding," Valcua said as he drew his longsword back. Would the coup de grâce be a thrust or—

Just then, a figure in a white dress floated down from the sky, accompanied by a seductive laugh. It was a woman of otherworldly beauty. She stood before them like a fairy, balanced on the blade of Valcua's sword.

"Long time no see, Grand Duke Valcua," she said, an alluring smile on her face.

"Why, if it isn't Duchess Miranda! How nice of you to deliver yourself to me like this."

"I wonder if even the Ultimate Noble is a match for the combined might of Braujou and me."

Grinning at the bewitching beauty, Valcua replied, "We shall see—now."

At that moment, Matthew saw the blade of the sword rise and fall ever so slightly.

Losing her footing, Miranda fell, her body straddling the blade as she did. As she landed, a vermilion line zipped through the duchess from the groin to the top of her head. Blood gushed from that line the instant Glencalibur was through her head.

"This can't be . . ." the lovely woman said, staggering.

"Wounds from Glencalibur don't close, no matter how great your molecular regeneration might be," Valcua sneered.

As she started to split down the middle, Miranda wrapped her arms around herself. Braujou had been sliced through at an angle, and

now the seductress had been split in two—such was the might possessed by the Ultimate Noble.

"How good of you to gather here in the valley for me today. I offer you my thanks . . . with this longsword!"

Once again he drew back his blade. He intended to impale both of them on it at the same time. However, something stopped him. Someone had grabbed the hilt of his magic sword.

Turning around, he said, "D."

Letting go of Glencalibur, the Ultimate Noble reached into his robe as he leaped ten feet away. What he sent flying like a shooting star was a blade over a foot and a half in length. A split second before it pierced the silvery chest, it was batted down by an iron rod.

While Valcua could tell Braujou and Miranda were getting away, he couldn't pursue them.

"So, your power is a match for mine and D's, is it? I wonder what the *other* you would do now?"

The grand duke raised his right hand. The sky was torn open as blue lightning scored a direct hit on the man with D's face. Ions and nothingness filled the air.

The two Nobles had already fled to the entrance of the valley.

White smoke and flames engulfed the man.

"Come," Valcua said to Matthew—who'd been left behind—grabbing him by the arm and pulling him closer before raising his right arm once more. He swung it down again in a forceful, powerful gesture.

"Ahhhhh!" Matthew screamed, his cry swallowed by movements of incredible mass.

The mountains themselves were shifting—mountains of steel. Mountains that rose more than three thousand feet above sea level were slamming into each other. The man who wore D's face was between them, as were Valcua and Matthew. The collision unleashed a wave of destruction to which the shock waves from the asteroid missile couldn't begin to compare. Winds pelted the plain and surged into the sky, shifting the clouds and obscuring the moon's corona. Far across the plain, remnants of the shock wave seemed to travel endlessly.

When the rumble finally grew thin, the mountains moved once again, returning to their original locations. The valley they'd crushed between them returned to silence in the moonlight as if nothing had happened, with no trace of the mysterious stranger or the Ultimate Noble to be found.

IN THE DEPTHS OF THE AKASHIC RECORD

CHAPTER 5

I

As soon as Valcua and Matthew returned to the castle, Kima rushed over to them.

"Lock this rascal up," Valcua said, handing Matthew over to his subordinate. "Were you watching?"

"Yes, I saw it all."

"Do you think he's dead?"

Kima didn't reply.

"Would you care to bet me that he still lives?"

"Unfortunately, that wouldn't be much of a wager."

Valcua recalled what the man who wore D's face had left behind: a hole carved into the steel mountain range. It'd been less than ten feet deep, but that would be more than sufficient to weather a collision between the two mountains.

Giving orders that no effort was to be spared in the search for him, Valcua left, while Kima brought Matthew to a subterranean dungeon, threw him into a solitary cell, and left again. Although it was "solitary," the cell was no smaller than the average room and was enclosed by invisible walls. The boy's vital signs were monitored continuously. There was no sign of any guards.

Walking stealthily, Kima headed for the master monitoring center. Since he'd been there until Valcua's return to the castle, it would be more accurate to say he went *back* to the center. There was almost no machinery in the spacious control room—the main computer controlled everything. Where the actual computer was located was a mystery, and it only recognized commands given by Valcua or Kima.

Filled with a misty fog, the room was reminiscent of the charnel houses of ancient times. In antiquated fashion, the room had towering stone posts in lieu of machinery, a vaulted ceiling, old-fashioned stone steps, and a bed that called to mind nothing save a gravestone—and on that bed, Callas lay on her back. She was no longer breathing.

Whisking the fog away from her, Kima stared at the dead woman's lovely features.

"You only had a short time left, but you did well. It's my turn next. I shall see you in the next world, if the fates allow."

He looked straight ahead. Milky fog eddied, clouding his field of view. The master monitoring center lay in its depths.

The fog wasn't really fog. It was the substance that filled the universe—the ether. It was said to be imprinted with records of the entire universe, spanning the past, present, and future. Even the science of the Nobility hadn't been able to decipher those records, and

history contained the names of only a few individuals who could read what was written there. They included Nostradamus, Abramelin, Paracelsus, and Swedenborg. The Sacred Ancestor was also on that list. One theory held that it was after reading the record one night that the Sacred Ancestor began his mysterious experiments. The "akashic record" was the general term given to the great ether that recorded all of creation.

After sacrificing the last of Callas's life and now adding his own, what was Kima trying to read in the ether?

"Open the door to the vault," he ordered.

Somewhere there was the creak of hinges that resembled a protracted scream. The milky whiteness crushed in around Kima. No matter how dense the super alloy used to contain it, the ether always seeped through it like some kind of ghostly matter.

"Was bringing him back to life the right thing to do? And what *is* he? I shall travel as far as my ability allows, Lord Valcua!" And then, after a pause, Kima added, "And Lord D!"

"Cold night, isn't it?" the hoarse voice said.

Naturally the wind couldn't find its way into this building, but the left hand seemed to know the weather anyway.

"They could change the temperature with one press of a button. I'll never understand how the Nobility think."

Being the living dead, vampires were generally unaffected by the surrounding climate, yet they seemed to prefer the same range of temperatures as ordinary people. In other words, they favored warmth over cold. That they nevertheless left outside temperatures the way they had always been could only be attributed to some odd complex involving the living.

"When that little girl wakes up, she's gonna try and get to Valcua. She's still under that brainwashing." Catching a breath, the left hand continued, "That shock wave earlier—it was like one mountain banging into another. Leave it to a Noble medical facility to stand up to that."

Though the massive shock wave of unknown origin had shattered the outer walls of the hospital and broken windows, everything had been repaired in five seconds' time. The repair system was nearly flawless.

"That explosion of power could've come from Valcua, but the only ones who'd drive him to do something like that are Braujou and Miranda. Well, I guess there's one other. Valcua was probably fighting *you*."

"I wonder whether he won or lost," D said as he peered into the darkness beyond the window.

“Oh, it’s not like you to get curious like that. Whichever it was, the smartest thing to do when Sue wakes up would be to get away from Valcua as fast as we can.”

After her treatment was finished, Sue had gone to sleep in one of the recovery rooms. Losing Seurat had come as a great shock to her.

Quickly stepping away from the window, D walked toward the door. He was in a large hall.

“Hey! Where are you—” the left hand started to ask, but then it suddenly said, “Is he here?”

D went into the center of the hall. Moonlight speared through the skylight, turning the darkness within as bright as day.

Opening the door from the front hall, the man in silver entered. Before the two faces of D, even the moonlight seemed to grow bashful.

The man slowly walked toward D. When he was fifteen feet away, his gait became unsteady. Falling forward hard, he made a thud that echoed through the hall.

“Don’t kill him! He might have information we—” the left hand blurted out. It had noticed that as D walked over to the fallen man, his right hand was going for his scabbard.

A cold and fierce will to kill crushed down on the figure on the floor. This young man wasn’t one to show mercy to a fallen foe.

The man suddenly lifted his face.

D halted.

It was neither Valcua’s nor D’s.

“D,” the man said, using both arms to lift his upper body from the floor.

“Well, I’ll be—” the left hand said before breaking off.

The world underwent a transformation. It was as if it had become a place for pious prayer.

“Do you remember me?” the man asked.

The unearthly air that gushed from every inch of D put his earlier will to kill to shame.

“You and I must—”

D kicked off the ground hard. Powerless to stop him, the man took a deadly blow from the Hunter.

“Remarkable,” the man said. “But that time still flows in a place beyond your reach. You should continue your journey, D.”

The casual manner in which the man got to his feet and walked away would’ve calmed the ire of rougher men.

“I’ve said it before, but you were my only success.”

As the figure strode past, D swung his sword at him once more, but the blade went right through his opponent as if he were made of water, and the man kept on walking without stopping.

“Knock it off,” the left hand told the Hunter.

The man staggered, but just the same he headed for the elevator in the hall.

"Enough with the attacks already," the left hand said.

Sword still in hand, D followed the man as he walked away.

Once they'd boarded the elevator, the man commanded, "Down."

About two seconds later the door opened. They were greeted by a space filled with objects reminiscent of purple crystals. The place was swimming in white light.

"This was my research facility," the man said. "Not even Valcua knows this is here. We're thirty miles underground—and not below the hospital."

The purple objects did not take the shape of crystals. Like the boulders in the valley or the equipment in Valcua's laboratory, they came in various geometric shapes.

Standing in the center of the room, the man raised his right hand.

The various shapes took on unstable forms and began spinning slowly. They produced no sound or even a breeze. However, D could sense that what might be described as an endless power blanketing the whole world had quietly been set in motion.

"A trillion—no, ten quadrillion joules . . . No, even more . . . With that much power, you could create a whole person!" the left hand exclaimed, seeming elated. "It stopped . . . More than a hundred quadrillion. But what's he trying to do that he'd need to store up that much juice?"

It was impossible for any living creature to contain such an enormous amount of energy. In fact, it would be impossible to store it in any form in this world. All of it must've been kept in another dimension or some other place outside real space.

Something like a pedestal rose from the floor by the man's feet. On top of it was what appeared to be a purple lever.

Taking a step back, the man looked at D and said, "Pull it. That will be enough to drain all the power from Valcua's domain."

"Can I ask why?" D said softly. Though his eerie aura had dissipated, it went without saying he could call upon swordplay that would leave gods and demons paralyzed if the situation warranted it.

In the light, the man said, "Don't you see? This territory doesn't belong to Valcua. It's mine. It, and the rest of the world. Valcua has taken his lust for power too far. Dispose of him, D."

"To suit your purpose?"

At D's remark, his left hand made a stunned expression. It also sounded like it was laughing.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. He needed to be reformed."

"So you sent him out among the stars—but that wasn't the end of it?"

"I knew from the start that was a pointless endeavor. He crafted a chip from scratch to guide his ship home and harnessed the energy of the universe. And though I did what I could to prevent it, I still knew it would happen."

"None of that concerns me."

"There's nothing in this universe that doesn't concern everything," the man told him in a solemn tone. "From the moment of our conception—nay, from long before any of us are born, we are all bound together, be the bonds deep or shallow. When Valcua returned from space, D, you were fighting Braujou. Do you think that was mere coincidence?"

In the white light, the young man in black had a soft glow.

"All of that was in accordance with my will. That was how you and Valcua came to meet, D. That, too, was unavoidable. D, Valcua is your—"

II

Valcua is your—

Just as he was making that bizarre proclamation, an astonished voice exclaimed, "*Oh!*" The voice didn't come from within the room. It was a cry from another world—one that only D and this man could perceive.

Turning his face to the ceiling, the man said, "Hmm, he read the akashic record."

"Valcua?" D murmured.

"Forget about that, D, and prepare to head back," the man said, looking at the door. "First, move the lever, and then get in the elevator. Part of the akashic record's vault has been destroyed."

A foglike substance began to fill the light. It glittered like the myriad stars of the Milky Way.

"If the record leaks out, it could warp the very fabric of the universe. I must prevent that. Hurry, D!"

D gazed at the lever. All around him flowed the dazzling Milky Way.

"D!" the man was heard to say, his voice calling out from the glittering depths. It flew as if in accompaniment to the action of the blade in D's right hand.

"What's this?"

This slight indication of surprise was swallowed by the light.

The lever had broken in half, and the pedestal in which it was set had fallen to the floor after being bisected at an angle.

"Why?" the voice asked, drifting even further away. "You won't accept anyone's help in destroying Valcua? Or are you worried that

the Dyalhis children would come to harm if this land were utterly destroyed? Very well. The laws of the universe are immutable. When the two of you meet, you can reach your own destiny. That lever would have taken away all the power I'd provided to this domain. You shall have to deal with both Valcua and me, D!"

Deciding that it was too late to go after the source of that voice, D headed for the door, the hem of his coat whipping out around him.

What would the fundamental collapse of the universe entail?

Eddying hypnotically, the white fog swallowed up the young man in black and went on to lay claim to all of the now-empty room.

Emerging from the elevator and going to see Sue in her recovery room, D raised one slim eyebrow a bit.

Sue wasn't there.

"Where'd she get off to?" the left hand asked in a wondering tone.

What had lured Sue away was Matthew's voice. As long as she was in Valcua's facility, her whereabouts would be all too clear. Realizing this, the Ultimate Noble had sent her brother's voice and likeness into the recovery room. The computer that oversaw her room had originally belonged to Valcua, after all. The apparition had come after D had vanished underground. Hearing Matthew and having him there beckoning to her, there was no way Sue could resist. She still wasn't free of his brainwashing.

Sue went outside. After she'd gone about a hundred yards, a number of red lights came toward her from across the plaza. It was one of Valcua's patrols. He must've directed a group in the area to head there at the same time he sent her the illusion of Matthew. Their flexible tentacles reached for the girl. Once she went to Valcua, his revenge would be half accomplished.

The tentacled cylinders zipped along at 120 miles per hour. Exiting the valley two hours later, they began to pass through an area where other buildings towered. Fiery blasts flew from nowhere, causing one of the cylinders to explode as soon as it was hit. The dozen cylinders tried to get in formation to defend themselves from this unexpected attack and strike back, but it was too late.

The one that held Sue tilted wildly. Pale-blue sparks shot from a hole that had been blown through its head. Before the disabled machine could fall, Sue jumped down onto the road. The bottoms of her feet felt awfully cold. Out of the corner of her eye she saw flames well up, and then a red-hot piece of shrapnel whizzed past her cheek.

Sue ran like a woman possessed. Ahead, she saw a building, and she could make out a door. She leaped for it. The automatic door opened smoothly to admit her, then closed again.

This was no time to relax. She couldn't be sure whoever was responsible for this ambush wouldn't come after her. She knew their target wasn't the android patrol unit.

Sue coughed violently in the thick dust that had been kicked up when she entered. Giving the place a better look, she found a seemingly endless hallway filled with that vague feeling unique to long-abandoned locales. Relying only on the light coming through the

windows, Sue ran further inside.

The sprawling building that spread before her reminded her of the hospital she'd been in earlier.

The girl came to an intersection of two corridors. All of the electronic displays were drained of energy. As she vacillated, she heard footsteps behind her and knew someone was coming closer. She turned for a look.

Red points of light were headed toward her. Each was part of a pair, and they were also smaller than those of the cylinders. The shadowy figures to which they belonged were human in shape.

Could they be servants of Valcua? In that case, she'd be fine.

It was an instinctive fear that caused Sue to start running away—she didn't know why she did so. And though she ran on and on in complete abandon, the footfalls were steadily closing on her. She began to get winded. Spying a door nearby, Sue practically threw herself against it to get it open.

The room was both spacious and cramped at the same time. Rows of transparent cases reminiscent of incubators were lined up in front of a dais that was several dozen yards wide. Sue ran between the cases. Although most of them remained intact, a number of the cases had been destroyed, their pieces scattered across the floor. Every time she felt the shards beneath the soles of her shoes, she wanted to thank Matthew for allowing her to put on footwear before they escaped from the hospital.

To her right, she saw a gargantuan glass cylinder. Filled with liquid, it had a humanoid figure floating in it. A faint blue light hung in the room—undoubtedly a power source remained functional somewhere in here. Though Sue was about to pass it by, a strange curiosity took hold of her, and she kept her gaze trained on the object. She halted. It was unbelievable. She stared so hard, her eyes seemed to bore into it. Several seconds later Sue's terrific scream echoed through the room.

This was it. It was the same thing Matthew had showed her back in Count Braujou's car. The thing he'd proudly described as part of Valcua's plan. However, seeing it before her very eyes, she found it repulsive.

There was no mistaking that it was a combination of a human being and some other creature. Soaking in a liquid that was probably a nutrient solution, the figure's upper body was human, while its lower half looked like a lump-covered arthropod, and though it was taller than a full-grown adult, the human portion resembled an enormous fetus. But that wasn't what prompted Sue's scream. The figure had suddenly twitched.

Her screams didn't stop. Still crying out, Sue backed away.

Something cold and clammy latched onto her wrist.

Could this thing be alive?

The fetus was roughly a foot and a half in length, its entire body covered with tumorlike bumps. It also had three eyes and six arms. Slowly, it was emerging from its cylinder.

Sue's screams died away.

"Wh—what . . . are . . . you . . ." the girl murmured, but she made no attempt to extricate her wrist from its grip. There was no telling what it would do if she made a move. The teeth that protruded from those swollen lips were the fangs of a carnivore. Its lips moved slowly.

"Hungry . . . I'm . . . so hungry . . ."

"What?"

The tension swiftly drained from Sue's body. The voice was that of a human child. There was no mistaking it. And it complained because its belly was empty.

"You . . . you can talk?"

"Yes . . . I can talk . . . But I'm . . . so hungry!"

"This is unbelievable—what are you doing in a place like this?"

"He said . . . it was an experiment . . . Talked about making . . . a new form of life . . ."

"An experiment? Whose experiment? Who made you like this?"

The infant shook its head weakly. Due to its disproportionate size, its head wobbled to one side and then the other.

Sue was on edge.

"I . . . don't know . . . It was a . . . big person."

Footsteps could be heard from the same direction Sue had come.

"Are you all alone?"

"Yes."

Sue held the child to her chest.

The infant continued, mumbling, "All the others . . . died . . . All of them."

As she ran, Sue shot glances to either side. The cases and cylinders held the products of bizarre experiments. Shriveled like mummies, melted into slime, rotted away to dust—each of them was a combination of a monster and a gigantic fetus.

Who on earth had done such a thing, and when? What had they hoped to ultimately produce with such experiments?

Dust rose around her feet—these were the remnants of demonic experiments undertaken many ages ago.

Suddenly, the infant's arm wrapped around her neck.

"You're warm. And soft."

The second Sue heard that satisfied tone, tears welled in her eyes.

The infant pulled its face closer to the nape of her neck. Its arms were unexpectedly strong.

Just then, the little body jerked to the right without warning.

Sue's eyes bulged in their sockets. She hadn't seen one of her pursuers running right alongside her.

"What are you *doing*?"

As she tried to pull the infant close again, her left arm was jerked back. Was there another one of them? With both hands now pinned, the infant was wrested from her.

"Stop it!"

The one who'd taken it away halted, and then bit the tiny figure. A wail rose from it, but it soon became quiet again.

"Stop it!" the girl exclaimed, struggling madly, but a pair of cold hands on her shoulders pinned her in place.

"Give it up, already," a man's voice said. "There's nothing else we can do. We'll drive a stake through its heart right away."

"You'll *what*?"

"Put your hand to the right side of your neck," another said.

That was where the infant had nuzzled against her. She had a hunch now. A cold and black foreboding.

When Sue didn't move her arms, someone grabbed her right wrist and pressed her index finger to her neck. A slight pain shot through her, and she found minor protuberances there. Two of them.

"That child was modified by the Nobility," the first voice said.

"Modified?"

"This lab was used for experiments in combining Nobles and human beings. So was the rest of this facility."

"Combining them?" Sue said, the man's blunt delivery leaving her mind in a state of turbulence. What kind of new life form had they created? She hoped whoever had conceived of this would be cursed for all eternity.

Off in the distance, where they'd taken the infant, there was a loud thud. Sue closed her eyes. Several seconds later, she opened them. Her head hurt terribly. She felt as if she'd awakened from a dream.

Sue said, "Weren't you guys . . ."

"You remember us? We hated you because you were with a Noble, and now we're in with them too."

"We were with that survey party."

As Sue turned in their direction, the keen fangs poking from their lips burned into the girl's eyes.

III

"So, Lord Valcua . . . He made you guys into . . ." Sue began in a hoarse voice, as she indeed recognized the men.

The men exchanged glances.

"No, we serve the great Miranda."

Damn! she thought, but she questioned the men no further, and it was decided that they would bring her back to Braujou and Miranda. That was a problem. Though Sue remained hesitant, the men considered Miranda's instructions absolute. Before she could convince them otherwise, they brought her outside.

Without a sound, crimson streaks of light flowed toward them from all sides. One man's head evaporated in a blast, and two others fell to the ground in rapid succession after the upper body of one and the right half of the other were destroyed.

"It's a patrol!"

"Some of them were left?"

"No, these are reinforcements."

As this tangle of shouts rang in Sue's ears, powerful arms wrapped around her waist, and someone ran down the corridor carrying her. The rest remained behind. They intended to buy Sue some time.

Fiery blasts came after her. The edges of her field of view were tinged with crimson.

After following the corridor through several turns, the man's body trembled a bit.

Sue felt herself sailing through the air. Landing on her shoulder but continuing to move forward, she felt an acute pain. She was knifing through the wind at an incredible speed on a moving sidewalk. It was rolling at sixty miles per hour.

Sue turned around.

The man had dropped just in front of the sidewalk. His head was missing.

Picking up speed, the sidewalk whisked the girl into the darkness.

A car raced by the light of the moon. The stench of blood filled the vehicle. It was as if each and every molecule of air was stained with gore, and just wringing your fist would cause blood to seep from between your fingers.

"It won't stop, Braujou," Miranda said in the blue darkness. She was naked. Tied around her face, her neck, her ample breasts, and her shapely waist were red scarves. On the floor where she sprawled there were piled dozens more scarves in the same hue.

From the huge bed beside her, the prone Braujou replied, "It would seem we underestimated him."

Bandages wrapped around him from the neck to the waist. They were the same color as Miranda's accouterments—because the Noblewoman's scarves were actually white strips of cloth used to stop the bleeding. She'd redone them dozens of times, and each time she

was powerless to keep the fresh blood from seeping in and dyeing them red.

Valcua's blade had sliced Braujou apart from the right side of his neck down to his left hip, while Miranda had been bisected from the groin to the top of her head. Both of them were Nobles. As long as they weren't stabbed through their one vital point, their cells' impressive regenerative abilities normally would come into play, closing wounds in the blink of an eye and stanching the bleeding. But this time that wasn't possible. If the wounds were kept covered, the internal organs would somehow continue to function, but the bleeding wouldn't stop. Though their Nobles' bodies could withstand enough blood loss to kill scores of humans, if this situation continued, their bodies would fail.

"Soon we won't be able to move. What do you say, Miranda?"

"They're not grave wounds. Certainly not cause for complaint," the seductress replied curtly, but her countenance appeared bloodless in the blue light. "Actually—I have a proposal."

Braujou's expression showed that he found Miranda's remark quite unexpected.

"Is that so? And what might that be?"

"We must prepare to call on our last piece of insurance."

"Insurance? No!" Braujou called out sharply.

"If we were to combine our energies, it might be possible."

"We can't do that!" Braujou exclaimed, his voice quaking with stern determination. "We swore to that human we would protect those children. And by my Noble soul, we shall not break that oath."

"If we're destroyed, there's no sense speaking of how we'll keep them safe. Given our situation, slaying Valcua is the only course to take."

"The only course to take is that which will save the Dyalhis children."

Saying nothing, the paraffin beauty smiled. Between the strips of cloth, a vermilion line ran from her face to her belly, and blood quickly bubbled out of it.

"What a splendid Noble you are. Very well. I shall execute my plan alone."

"Won't you reconsider this, Miranda?"

From beneath the bloody and discarded dress by her side, the duchess produced a bejeweled dagger and drew it from its sheath.

"Hey!"

Disregarding Braujou's disgusted cries, Duchess Miranda put the golden blade over her heart and thrust it in deep . . . and then she slashed herself. Opening a crescent-shaped gash eight inches long, she shifted the dagger to her left hand and thrust her right one into the

wound. Blood spilled out—not only from the wound, but from the vermilion lips the beauty kept pursed as well. Yet there was no change in her expression, her lovely features resplendent in the blue light as she watched her own crazed actions with detachment.

Giving a slight sigh, she pulled her right hand out. Her fingers clenched a bloody heart. There were rubbery snaps as her veins tore. Blood went flying. Nevertheless, her heart continued beating.

"My sentiments, my power—everything is in my heart of hearts. It's up to you to draw the curtain of fate."

As he watched the seductress talking with a gleam of madness in her eye, Count Braujou heaved a long sigh.

"We've got no transportation!" the left hand said, pointing out the brutal truth as they were about to leave the valley. "At this rate, if we don't hook up with Braujou, it'll take days to reach Valcua's castle. Ah, how I wish that Kima guy was here!"

The Hunter's cyborg horse had remained tethered to Braujou's car when D and Kima made the trip to Valcua's castle. D knew that as well, but true to form he made no complaint, but rather kept on walking in silence.

His face suddenly turned to the west. No sooner did he recognize the sound of hooves striking the earth than a white horse came galloping straight toward him. It halted right in front of D, who put a black-gloved hand on its neck and stroked it several times before noticing the silver card attached to the saddle.

"Braujou?"

When his index finger touched the edge of the card, the giant's face suddenly appeared in midair.

"Here's your horse. A lack of transportation might prove inconvenient. I only hope your steed likes you," the Nobleman said gravely, and then he vanished.

"If there's one thing this world needs more of, it's thoughtful Nobles," the left hand jeered.

Ignoring this comment, D got into the saddle. His destination was obvious: Valcua's castle.

"He's approaching," Valcua heard a machine say.

"Kima," he started to call out, but then he halted. He hadn't seen a trace of the hooded figure since shortly after his return to the castle. Though he'd given orders to wait, distance meant nothing to Kima.

The screen in midair showed D riding a horse. Not only was the Hunter's horsemanship exceptional, but every time the Ultimate Noble changed the angle, the wonder of that beautiful visage made him sigh in spite of himself.

"Valcua, get ahold of yourself," he said, and a trickle of blood began to run from his lip. Only by biting down on it had he returned to his senses. D's looks were that remarkable.

"As great as his beauty is, his skill is even more incredible. But our earlier encounter was just an exchange of pleasantries. To determine if he's a fit opponent for me, I shall have to take his measure as a commander."

As the same Ultimate Noble who'd moved mountains grinned, his eyes were full of pride and confidence. This confrontation could no longer be avoided. But where had Valcua's interest in investigating D originated?

"How long until dawn?" the grand duke inquired.

"Two hours and twelve minutes, milord."

"If he keeps going that way, he'll run right into the dimensional battlefield. Have the homunculus army get two divisions ready," Valcua ordered after facing the sky.

As D headed north, enormous battlements began to come into view far off in the distance. However, this wasn't the reason D halted his steed. The grave sound of tires and footsteps was approaching from up ahead.

"There are a lot of 'em. From the sound of the footsteps, I'd say a full division—three thousand men. As for vehicles, well, a thousand or so. Seems like they've got a battalion with flight packs, too. Even knowing how powerful you are, this seems to be seriously overdoing it. Valcua must be a first-rate coward!"

The earthshaking thud of countless combat boots from the depths of the darkness became pale-faced men in uniform who stopped about thirty feet from D.

As D remained in place, a man who looked to be a general appeared riding a skeletal android horse. Giving a crisp salute, he said, "I am General Clemens, commander of Combat Division Z under Grand Duke Valcua. From this moment forward, I am at your command."

"What's that supposed to mean?" D asked, but just then a gigantic image of Valcua's face appeared high in the sky.

"Allow me to explain. D, I'm giving you these five thousand men —a division. If you wish to see me or rescue the human girl Sue, you must direct them in battle against my forces. I wish to see how you handle command."

"He's got some weird kinks, don't he?" the left hand murmured, knowing its remarks wouldn't reach the grand duke's ears.

"Beyond the castle walls you see up ahead you will find Sue and myself. I have the same number of troops. Here's a diagram of the

inside of my castle, D. Draw on all your knowledge when considering where I might be lurking or what kind of formations will be lying in wait for you. I'll have you know that although your soldiers are artificial life forms, they are most definitely alive. They feel pain when injured. D, I truly look forward to seeing how you view these men, and how you utilize them. An hour remains until dawn—and the game shall be decided in that time. If it goes longer than that, I shall retreat to a resting place you'll never find no matter how you search. And the girl will go with me."

When Valcua vanished, five thousand men were left on the plain, waiting for instructions from their new commander to fight Valcua. However, even D couldn't imagine going into battle with five thousand soldiers and their assorted armaments. How would D carve his way through this great conflict when it was more than a solitary blade could handle?

MOONLIT BATTLEFIELD

CHAPTER 6

I

Needless to say, D wasn't on a battleground. On the other hand, it was far too vast to call it a castle. Valcua had referred to it as the "dimensional battlefield." Surrounded by walls a thousand yards high, the grounds covered roughly forty thousand acres—encompassing mountains, valleys, rivers, plains, and hills all patterned after the outside world. Having positioned his infantry and a dimensional tank battalion on the plain and artillery units on the hills, the grand duke now waited for D and his forces to arrive. The battlefield could be entered by gates at the four points of the compass, and surveillance aircraft nearly a mile in the sky were monitoring all of them. Valcua guessed that D would be coming through the south gate. It was the shortest distance to travel, and once in it would be easy to move while keeping under cover.

"Now, how will he attack, and how shall I counter?"

In the headquarters that he'd established on top of one of the hills, the grand duke peered at a layout of the battlefield that was projected in midair. They would know every move D made, but their deployments would also be relayed to his side. Things would be equal, so to speak.

"The rest will depend on D's ability," he said, looking at Sue by his side. From the center where those disturbing biological experiments had been conducted, she'd been taken on a high-speed expressway right to Valcua's castle. In her present condition, this had to seem ideal to Sue. As she sat next to Valcua, there wasn't a hint of fear in her expression. Strangely enough, however, she didn't look satisfied either.

"D has to come," Valcua said. "An hour remains—and if he hasn't come by daybreak, your life is forfeit. Though in truth, in your condition, you wouldn't mind falling victim to me. Your older brother educated you well, didn't he?"

Sue nodded.

Meanwhile, what was the eagerly awaited D doing outside the battlefield? The first thing he'd done was to select several experts at modification from among his troops. Out on the battlefield, engineers who scavenged parts from broken equipment to create something new were indispensable. On hearing D's request, they were surprised at first, but then they smiled broadly.

"That'll be a lot easier than turning a beast into a bird," they assured him.

D went on to choose soldiers who professed to be excellent marksmen or were confident in their skill at hand-to-hand combat, and after a demonstration of their abilities he narrowed the selection down to five of each. For those good at hand-to-hand combat, D was their opponent. Coming at him with bayonets, spears, or swords, the soldiers were forced to surrender after a flashing movement of D's right hand either snapped their blades or left their spears chopped in two. In the case of bayonets, the Hunter merely grabbed the gun and tossed it away every time, resulting in the elimination of every challenger.

D then turned his attention to the tank battalion lined up on the distant plain.

Thirty minutes passed.

The voice of the computer in Valcua's command center rang out, announcing, "Forces approaching the south gate. Preparations for attack are complete."

"Strictly by the book. Is that all D can come up with as a commander?" Valcua spat disdainfully, then ordered, "As soon as all his vehicles have entered the battlefield, blast them to pieces!"

The results were as hellish as the image the grand duke's brain had conjured. The tanks under D's command were powerless in the face of Valcua's waiting tank battalion, which discharged their dimensional cannons in unison and banished the Hunter's forces to another dimension.

"What's his next attack?"

"There isn't one."

When the Ultimate Noble heard this reply, the first shade of suspicion skimmed across his face.

"Not coming on the attack? Why, that's—"

At that instant, the door to the headquarters fell to the floor in flames. The handful of figures who rushed in quickly overpowered Valcua's guards and soldiers, overrunning the room with their blades and laser rifles.

"Of all the underhanded . . ." Valcua groaned in a low voice, turning to look at Sue.

"*D!*"

With Sue behind him, the vision of beauty in black inquired in a soft tone, "What kind of marks did I get?" His voice was cold as ice, but he sounded slightly amused nonetheless.

"Given a full division, you opted for guerrilla warfare? Very well, I give you a perfect score, less one point." The hoarse voice laughed. "That one point is for the commander personally heading such a reckless attack. And for coming to see me. What can an army do once

it's lost its commander? D, you don't imagine that this settles everything, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Then face me. To tell the truth, I find it lamentable that the plains of this battlefield haven't rung with the cries of soldiers for the last five millennia."

"Okay," D said, sheathing his sword on the spot. A stir went through his group. "Order your soldiers to retreat from the battlefield. Tell them they're not to take up arms again. And they're to turn the girl over to whomever wins."

"Fine," Valcua said, only too happy to comply.

Several minutes later, the two of them squared off on the vast plain that was to be their battlefield.

"Before we begin, I must ask you something," said Valcua. "How were you able to make a lightning-fast strike against my headquarters?"

That was undoubtedly the greatest mystery to Valcua.

"We took the engine and other parts from one of your tanks and made a stealth helicopter."

"Oh really? I'm surprised you were able to make such modifications. That design shouldn't have been possible."

"Don't you know the skill of the engineers you yourself created?"

Valcua leaned back in a fit of laughter. The sound caused buildings to quake.

"Now that you mention it, I don't really know anything about this part of my domain. Hmm. I don't know how many soldiers there are, what they eat, or even where the food comes from. Come to think of it, it's been a long time since I considered such things. My only thoughts were that if I had ten million troops, I would win the battle even if it cost all of their lives."

Taking ten men alone as D had done and making a strike against the central command was alien to the Ultimate Noble's way of thinking.

"I suppose I'm like a drunken fool who can move mountains and change the movements of the stars, yet can't walk in a straight line. However, against you man to man, I can probably cut you down."

Glencalibur whistled from its sheath. Simultaneously, D drew his blade. His sword seemed to drink up the moonlight.

Both started running at the same time. The instant the two figures melted into one, red sparks scattered and the two switched positions.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed a hoarse voice.

A thread of black coursed down D's forehead, spreading like the mesh of a net when it came to the bridge of his nose.

"Once Glencalibur has been drawn, it won't be sheathed until it's

tasted blood."

Before Valcua had finished speaking, D's sword danced out. As the mysterious blade bore down on him like a black tsunami, Valcua managed to knock it away, but his stance was badly broken. Ignoring his sword as it sailed into the air, D had thrown himself at the Ultimate Noble's chest, driving the dagger in his left hand through the armor beneath Valcua's robe and into his accursed heart.

"You bastard!" Valcua groaned as he swung Glencalibur down, but D's blade stopped it and the Hunter's dagger gouged even deeper into the grand duke's heart.

Heaven and earth took on a blue glow, for lightning had struck on this moonlit night. It wasn't D that was hit but rather the blade of Glencalibur, though the Hunter was also singed by the electromagnetic waves.

Giving off flames and black smoke, the two men separated. A split second before they did, Glencalibur made a movement Valcua had never intended, splitting D's right shoulder open. Black blood sprayed out.

The magical sword was raised again for another blow against D, but it then crashed to the ground. Valcua had fallen.

From all sides people pressed forward, carrying off Valcua and charging D simultaneously. A sword gleamed in the hands of each. However, before they could swarm over D, other figures flew in from the sidelines with flashes of laser fire and naked steel, scattering Valcua's followers and spiriting D away.

D walked without any aid from his rescuers. Half his face and the right side of his body were stained with black blood, but if he'd swung the sword he'd transferred to his left hand, Valcua's underlings would've invariably found that their heads had parted company with their bodies. Apparently his supporters understood as much, and none of them offered D a shoulder to lean on.

They guided D underground and got him onto a high-speed transport. Resembling a ski gondola, it ran toward the center of the territory at several hundred miles per hour. Leaving half the group on the platform, the other five boarded with him.

"Where are we going?" D asked.

"We're bringing you to the medical treatment center," one answered. Though assigned to D, they had once been Valcua's soldiers.

"This is Valcua's castle. Someone will come after us in no time. His computer oversees any treatment."

"If we switch it over to manual mode, we should be able to stop the bleeding, sterilize the wound, and get you sewn up."

"This wound won't close!" said the hoarse voice, stunning the

soldiers. “Glencalibur is just the sort of sword you’d expect the Ultimate Noble to love. No matter how I try to stop it, you just keep bleeding. This calls for radical treatment!”

“Wow, your left hand can talk?” one of the others said, his brow crinkling as he stared at it intently.

“What are you looking at? I ought to charge you admission!” the hand snapped, startling the man. “Instead of hitting some quack medical center, there’s someplace better to go. First off, let’s hurry to the reactor.”

The group halted before a massive door.

“Beyond this lies the antiproton reactor.”

D nodded, saying, “You men head back.”

“The defense systems are operational. They pose a danger to you in your current condition. We’ll accompany you.”

“Oh, and why is that?” D asked in a terribly hoarse voice. “I thought you boys had been given orders to rejoin your unit once the surprise attack was over. So, why don’t you go already?”

“We are prepared to die,” the first one said.

“Even if ours is an artificial life, that doesn’t mean we don’t fear death. And when our colleagues are slain, we feel sadness too.”

“Yet we were told we were born to die before we were sent to serve you, sir,” the third one said. “But you wouldn’t let anyone die. With just ten men you made a tactical strike against Lord Valcua to decide the battle—and that is something only a born commander can do.”

“You spared our lives—and now we’re here, ready to give them for you, sir. We who didn’t want to die have decided to give our lives for you—so please allow us to do so.”

“I can’t,” D said softly, yet his words had the knife edge of the wind to them. His face was pale as paraffin, and he continued to lose blood. “I’ll take the life I came here for. The rest of you should enjoy yours.”

And saying just this, the young man in black turned, his coat whipping out around him. Particle cannons mounted on the ceiling and walls turned on D without a sound and then deactivated. Saying nothing, D turned toward the entrance to the reactor.

The other men were frozen in place, but someone’s recitation of an ancient poem rang in their ears.

Piercing wind,
Freezing river of Yi.
The hero fords,
And he never returns!

It was unclear what kind of trick he used; the Hunter simply seemed to press his left hand to the door to force it open, and as the men watched him disappear into the white light, all they could do was stand in stunned amazement.

II

The reactor—the energy source for the Ultimate Noble—didn't work by nuclear fission or fusion. The energy that maintained life in his domain all came from contact between protons and antiprotons. Because Valcua's reactor produced energy that was far purer than any of the other forms of power currently in use in the world, the extremely delicate combination of the particles was conducted with a devilish attention to detail.

"This will be kinda hairy, D," the left hand said. The fact that it called its host by name revealed its nervousness. "Combining protons and antiprotons is the toughest kind of work, even for a computer. One tiny little leak, and the delicate balance gets upset. After that, the reactor goes out of control. Once out of the reactor, the antiprotons could find endless particles to hook up with in the air, burning them all up. Not only Valcua's domain would be wiped out, but the whole planet and maybe even the whole universe if antiproton production continued long enough."

"Is there any other way?" D inquired softly.

"No," the left hand replied, the tiny eyes that had formed in its palm staring at D's feet.

Bright blood formed a trail across the glistening floor. It wouldn't have been strange for someone in this situation to pass out or die from losing so much blood.

"I guess we'll give it a shot, then. But we've got another problem."

"Earth?"

"Right you are. Out of earth, fire, water, and wind, we don't have the earth," the left hand said in a tone dripping with distress. "Of the four elements, the main two are earth and water. No matter how much air or fire I take in, I can't get pure energy without the other two. Normally, having just the other three would get the job done, but this wound is different. You got it from Valcua—the Ultimate Noble. There'll be no fixing it completely without the element of earth."

"Try," D said flatly. Life and death didn't matter to him, but his tone represented an iron will that absolutely would not give up.

D put his left hand against the wall of the reactor.

"Sure. Here goes nothing!" the hoarse voice responded.

D's right hand went for his scabbard—and then he reversed his

grip on the sword, driving it through the back of his left hand and deep into the reactor wall.

His sword was then returned to its scabbard.

The boiling-hot form of ultraenergy had already begun to spill through the crack his blade had made. However, the warning klaxons didn't ring out, nor did the emergency lamps light up. And the Hunter's left hand remained pressed to the crack.

A minute passed. Two minutes.

"Good enough," the hoarse voice told him.

The fateful moment had come. D had to close the hole he'd opened.

"You know what you're doing, right?" the hoarse voice inquired, wanting to be sure.

Making no reply, D merely stared at the split back of his left hand. But only for a moment. His steel flashed out, piercing the back of his hand once more, in precisely the same location.

"Good."

At the same time the hoarse voice spoke, D pulled his sword back out. The first thrust had started the flow, and the second sealed it off —but what kind of trick had the Hunter called on? Even after his left hand came away, the burning heat remained contained. The wall of the reactor didn't have a scratch on it as it continued to give off the same dull glow.

"Fire is all set. Now for water."

D pressed his left hand against his shoulder. It went without saying what became of the blood spilling from the Hunter. Pulling his left hand away after it gave him the signal, he then raised the same hand high in the air. There was a whistling sound as it sucked air into its tiny mouth. The wind hissed in the otherwise-tranquil atmosphere. Deep in that tiny maw, a blue flame sparked to life.

"How's that?" the mouth asked.

"No change," D replied.

"Then it's just as I thought. Without the element of earth, your wound can't be closed. What to do, what to do . . ."

D went outside.

The others were waiting.

"I told you to go," D said to the soldiers.

"This breach has been detected," one of them said.

"We know that," the hoarse voice replied.

D looked at the soldiers without saying a word. Once the intrusion into the reactor had been noticed, they would ward off Valcua's attacks while D accomplished his ends. That was why the men had waited.

A number of footsteps could be heard closing on them from either

end of the corridor.

"They've got us cornered," the left hand said, sounding disgusted. "Given their numbers, escaping will be tricky—especially in your condition. If only we could find a clod of dirt somewhere, we'd have no trouble at all."

Exchanging glances, the men looked at D.

"Did you say dirt, sir?"

"Yes," D replied.

"In that case, why didn't you say so earlier?"

The men nodded in unison, and then one of them drew the saber from his hip and plunged it through his own heart before anyone could stop him. His body thudded to the floor, instantly becoming a pile of dirt that filled his clothes.

"*Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.* We're homunculi fashioned from clay," one of them declared proudly. "Now we can finally be of some use to you. Thank the gods. Best of luck to you, sir."

And with that, the rest of them stabbed their chests in unison, returning to their true form as they fell at D's feet.

D gazed intently at the remains of the brave warriors.

The hoarse voice said, "We didn't even know their names."

"Their sacrifice won't be forgotten."

D planted one knee on the floor and held his left hand out over the dirt. It was such a solemn scene it would've made anyone who saw it stop and pause in reflection.

"The guardroids sent to Antiproton Reactor A have been annihilated. All one hundred were destroyed."

Valcua listened to the electronic voice's updates from inside his coffin. His Noble senses told him that outside his castle, dawn was spreading like water. His body was cooling rapidly.

The stench of blood filled the coffin's interior. Valcua could feel the unpleasant warmth of it soaking through his clothes. More than an inch of blood had pooled in the bottom of his coffin. His blood. Not even the medicenter installed in his coffin could do anything about the wound D had dealt him, and even now he continued to bleed.

"If not for you, I would've met with defeat, Glencalibur," he said to his beloved sword, which lay by his left side. "But all you're good for is cutting. I shall need to find some other way to close my wound. Are you listening, child?"

The grand duke turned to the right. Sue's pale face was there. When D and Valcua's battle ended in a draw, she'd been spirited away by the Ultimate Noble's underlings.

"The irony of this is, there's only one person in the whole world who can heal me," he said, stroking Sue's face with his hand. It was

softer and more sensitive than she expected. “And no one but you can make him do it. Child, you must say exactly what I tell you now. Tell your revered D, ‘Please get the other man with your face and bring him to the grand duke.’ ”

Can you hear me, Braujou?

Can you hear me, Miranda?

They both already had entered the sleep of the Nobility, but the words rang out in their brains.

This is Grand Duke Valcua. I shall make this brief. At present, I’m wounded. The injury is so grave that even I might succumb. So I’ve undergone treatment. However, I’m powerless to do anything about it. Therefore, I’ve decided to call upon the services of the very best physician, the only one who can help me. Though he isn’t a resident of my lands, he was only too happy to accept this task. His name is—

In the darkness, Count Braujou’s eyes opened. They were burning red.

“You heard that, didn’t you, Miranda?” he said.

They were both in his bedroom, he in his own coffin and Miranda in another for guests.

“Indeed, I did.”

Miranda’s response sounded lethargic, and Braujou knew better than anyone that it wasn’t due to a lack of sleep. It was an enfeeblement brought about by her massive blood loss.

“I can’t believe he’d do it. But even if he’s the greatest Hunter, he’s still up against the Ultimate Noble. I suppose an offer of part of that fortune and power would be enough to bend even his iron will. It’s not inconceivable.”

“That’s preposterous!” Miranda snapped before donning a grin. “It’s surprising how little a man can know about men. Don’t you understand what kind of man he is? He’s pure steel, body and soul. He’d sooner die than go over to Valcua’s side. He absolutely wouldn’t do it. I can tell. I’m a woman.”

“What would a woman know about men?” Braujou spat. “At any rate, as soon as the sun goes down, I’m going to go find D and get to the bottom of this. And don’t try to stop me, Miranda.”

Their conversation died.

Naturally, telling the two of them that D had agreed to treat him was part of Valcua’s plot. Hoping to stack the odds against D, he wanted the Hunter and Braujou to fight each other, and if one of them were slain, the grand duke could then deal personally with the one who remained. Though it was a simple plan, it should prove effective against a warrior at heart like Braujou.

What would happen next?

As the players kept their various thoughts and schemes to themselves, the sun rose, then set.

III

An enormous horse and rider barreled through the darkness like a storm cloud, the man suddenly halting his steed with a masterful handling of the reins. Iron horseshoes scraped against the ground, shooting off sparks. And what a horse it was! Measuring ten feet from the ground to its shoulder, it was a good twenty feet from the base of the neck to the tail.

Astride this steed, a man who needed no introduction growled in a voice like thunder, “D, you son of a bitch, where are you?”

A long spear whistled in his right hand—but the Nobleman’s posture, his voice, and even his handling of the weapon were all clearly lacking compared to how they once had been. Concealed by his cape, his abdomen dripped blood that stained his saddle and dampened the back of his horse.

Count Braujou’s aim was to find D. That alone. While he was the very picture of bravery and frankness, the Nobleman doubted that D, of all people, would have agreed to treat Valcua, but the grand duke’s words had seared themselves into his consciousness and he couldn’t shake them. Not knowing D’s location, it was madness to ride into the middle of his foe’s domain. The Nobleman was that impulsive, and his anger ran that deep.

Three hours had already passed since he’d left his car, galloping on and on. The next thing he knew, his surroundings were lost behind a whiteness that resembled a mist.

“What’s all this? It doesn’t seem to be fog.”

Braujou went on. He’d made up his mind to do so, and no one could stop this Greater Noble.

Suddenly, what looked to be a collapsed building appeared on the other side of the fog. Focusing his night-piercing eyes on it from the saddle, he found that the foglike substance seemed to issue from the depths of the rubble.

“Even the Ultimate Noble’s buildings can come to ruin, can they?” the count couldn’t help but murmur wistfully, and when he turned his gaze to the right, a figure who’d come startlingly close appeared from the mistlike veil that shrouded him.

The face was none other than D’s. At first the count suspected it was someone or something imitating him, but on further consideration he decided only D could possibly possess those looks.

“D, what are you doing here?” he asked, thrusting his long spear forward. He made it seem like nothing short of an interrogation.

The other man didn't reply. He just stood motionless, looking up at the count as if in a daze.

Feeling something was wrong with that vacant stare, Braujou continued, "I hear you've agreed to treat Valcua—is that true?"

Nothing from the other man.

"Since you don't deny it, I'll take that as an admission of guilt. But why?"

Not a word.

"As you won't answer me, I shall have to consider you a traitor and deal with you appropriately. You understand that, don't you?"

Silence.

A vein in the count's temple wriggled like a fat worm. He uttered a curse that made his horse rear, and when its front legs touched the ground again, the Nobleman timed a thrust of his spear to coincide with it.

Without time to flee, D was pierced through the chest.

A cry of surprise rang out, but it came from Braujou. His spear had stopped dead, pinned under D's left arm.

"Shit! Damn you!" Count Braujou cursed.

Hoisting his spear into the air, D and all, the count hauled back fiercely and snapped the shaft forward again.

Smashing into the mound of rubble, D was immediately buried beneath falling stones and chunks of concrete.

"Most disappointing. I'd expected much better from him," Braujou said, but before he'd finished voicing his disappointment, he was struck by a flying chunk of concrete. He went numb above the shoulder. The size of the piece was partly to blame, but the count was also injured.

Another chunk came. This one he impaled. As D appeared, pushing his way out of the rubble, the count hurled the concrete back at him.

D batted it aside. The five-ton chunk of rubble was sent flying to his left with ease, where it immediately disappeared into the darkness. Off in the distance, a great thud echoed.

Wheeling his steed around, the Nobleman raced toward his opponent. But he wasn't there.

Both the count and his horse rose in the air. Hurled before he could even cry out, Braujou executed a flip in midair and landed neatly, while to his right the cyborg horse smashed to pieces.

"You bastard—I was right about you!"

Not the least bit bothered by the spearhead he'd extended, D walked toward the count.

With a murderous howl, Braujou made a horizontal swipe of the long spear at the scruff of his adversary's neck. The incredible force of

the impact numbed the Nobleman's very brain, but his eyes opened wide to find D with his left hand raised to ward off the blow, and now he was charging forward at full speed. A twisted metal fragment gleamed in his right hand. Thrown off balance and unable to do anything, the count cried out as the piece of metal whistled toward his face.

There was a sound of otherworldly beauty. And then the count saw it. He saw a sword blade biting into the metal fragment that had been brought down at him like a dagger.

Instinctively turning his gaze toward his savior, the count exclaimed in astonishment, "D! It seems I had the wrong man."

Looking at the silvery D even the count had doubted at first, the D in black told him, “I’ve been looking for you. Fighting myself would be rather bizarre. If possible, put on a different face.”

The metal fragment was quickly drawn back.

“Is that . . . me?” the silvery D said in a tone devoid of cadence. “What am I doing here? Who are you?”

“I don’t know,” D replied. “What I do know is that there’s a certain man who has business with you. I need you to come with me.”

“Okay,” the man in silver said without argument, discarding the metal fragment.

D sheathed his sword as well. From up in the saddle, he called over to Count Braujou, “What’ll you do?”

“The only thing I can. Since my horse was smashed, I have no choice but to go with you. But now that we come to it—which one of you Ds agreed to treat Valcua?”

“Let’s go.”

Saying this, D started to lead the way, with the silvery version of himself and Braujou following behind him.

“How long will it take to reach that villain’s castle?” Braujou asked.

“We should get there just past noon tomorrow.”

“*What?*”

“If you don’t like that, walk faster. You can even run if you like.”

So great were the count’s anger and horror, he didn’t even notice that the Hunter’s final remarks had been in a terribly hoarse voice.

Fortunately, there was no need to run. After traveling for about three hours, they ran into Duchess Miranda with the count’s car.

“I told you to wait there,” the vehicle’s owner said, unable to admit he was glad to see it and her.

“Aren’t you less than charming,” Miranda countered.

Sue and Matthew had already fallen into the enemy’s hands, and now the two Nobles and the other two passengers were racing full speed across the plain by night. Was it to rescue the Dyalhis children, or to satisfy their own plans?

The moonlight was pregnant with premonitions of blood.

Presently, large buildings unlike anything they’d seen before filled either side of the road. The group didn’t know that at one time, two men had traveled out there and seen those same buildings. Their skeletons now lay by the side of the road. They caught D’s eye from the back of his horse, but he rode past the remains without saying a word.

“At long last. This really gets the blood pumping,” Braujou said to

the duchess, who was behind him.

When she didn't reply, he added, "Doesn't it?" And then he turned to face her.

"She's gone," he mumbled to himself. No one could understand the comings and goings of the elusive beauty.

In no time, enormous steel gates opened to greet D and the car. The road ran through a front yard that seemed to stretch on as endlessly as the plains, eventually leading to the entrance of an oddly shaped castle.

Countless figures were lined up to greet them—women in white gowns and men in black formal wear. When D and Count Braujou dismounted, the greeters bowed in unison and sang out, "For Grand Duke Valcua!" Though they had the outward appearance of human beings, it was plain to see they were actually androids.

"Now *that's* what I call a fine reception," Braujou remarked with a satisfied snort.

Buffered by nearly a hundred men and women, the three guests were ushered into a stunningly opulent hall. Beneath a golden chandelier the size of a small ship there was a sofa, and it was there that Valcua lay.

"Now this is really something," a hoarse voice from the vicinity of D's left hand said with admiration. It wasn't talking about the bejeweled splendor of the room. It was commenting on Valcua's willingness to appear before would-be assassins in his injured state.

"You seem to be one shy," was the first thing Valcua said.

"She does have a tendency to wander," Braujou replied. "By now, she's probably turned herself into a set of sheets so she can kill you in your sleep."

Ignoring the count, Valcua asked, "When did you get treatment, D?"

There was no reply.

"Well, it doesn't matter. I'm quite pleased you found that fellow. Now, would you be so kind as to turn him over to me?"

"Give us the children first."

"Excuse me?"

"If you don't wish to, I'll cut him down here and now," D said, using his left hand to grab the other young man by the arm.

Rubbing his head, Valcua replied, "This will never do. What if I were to tell you I'll kill them both if you don't hand him over?"

"Then you'd die too," D answered flatly.

With a wry grin, Valcua said, "Good enough. At any rate, I shall let you see they're unharmed. Bring them!"

Less than five minutes after the grand duke gave this command, Sue entered, surrounded by guardroids. "D!" she cried, and no one

tried to stop her from running over to him. The grand duke was being generous in that regard.

"And what of her brother?" Braujou inquired.

"He escaped," said Valcua.

"What?"

"He was here just a short time ago. The surveillance system shows no trace of an intruder. However, it did record her brother talking to someone who couldn't be seen."

"I see," Braujou groaned in a low voice.

"For the time being, you'll have to settle for just that one," Valcua said. "Everything else can wait until my treatment is finished. That's when your fates, too, shall be decided."

THE ULTIMATE NOBLE

CHAPTER 7

I

They all looked like they had bathed in blood. Even their eyes seemed to give off blood light. Braujou, Valcua, his retainers—all of them. The only one whose eyes remained crystal clear was D.

"First, relinquish that man," Valcua said, extending one hand.

"No," D replied, as Sue took cover behind him.

"Oh, really?"

"You'll get your treatment after we have both the Dyalhis children."

Their gazes met in midair, sending invisible sparks flying. The grand duke's underlings stiffened. So intense was the killing lust between these two, it even caused androids to malfunction.

"I'd like to ask you something first," Count Braujou said, raising his right hand.

"And what might that be?" Valcua replied.

"Who is this fellow? Why does he wear D's face?"

"He got it from the Sacred Ancestor. I was told to bring him out in my hour of direst peril. Perhaps D's face is more fetching than the other ones."

"The other ones?" the count asked, his features twisting with confusion as he looked at the man in question. "You mean to say he has other faces?"

"Yep," said the hoarse voice.

Braujou stared strangely at D's left hand.

"Two more. Valcua's and—"

Sue gasped. The second the Ultimate Noble's name had been mentioned, D's face had been transformed into Valcua's, as if the man had just noticed the other personality that slumbered within him.

As Braujou leveled his long spear, the expression he wore was colored more with shock than alarm. Suddenly there were two of the villain. His reaction was understandable.

"What's all this?"

"I'm Val . . . cua," the man responded sleepily. "Just a moment . . . I'll fix you up . . . right away."

Naturally, this remark was directed to the real Valcua, but in an inhospitable turn of events, the grand duke had the same look in his eyes as Count Braujou as he stared at the man who wore his face.

"Who—who are you?"

Though it wouldn't have been strange for D, Braujou, the hoarse voice, or even Sue to pose this question, it had actually come from Valcua.

Apparently the man couldn't comprehend the query, because he stood there rather stupidly, tilting his head a little to one side and then the other before he said, "I'm Valcua." This time his voice was steady. "I'm you. And as a result, I can't let your wound go untreated. Let me see it."

And having said this, the man was just about to step forward when the head of the long spear zipped through his back and jutted from his chest.

A commotion like tall grass rustling in the breeze went through Valcua's retainers and Sue, while the man who'd been stabbed, D, and Valcua didn't say a word. It made for an eerie scene.

"Nothing could be more trouble than having another Ultimate Noble," Braujou said as he twisted the head of his spear from side to side.

The strange creature who could've been dubbed Valcua Two didn't bleed a drop, showed no signs of pain, and didn't seem the least bit interested in this turn of events.

"I knew all along there'd be no point in doing this. But how about *this*?"

Pulling the spear free with a twist of his arm, the count made a horizontal swipe at the new Valcua. The ten-foot-long head of the spear became a serpent, heavy and sharp. The decapitation made a satisfying sound.

"I'll be damned!" Braujou exclaimed with admiration, adjusting his stance with the long spear.

Valcua Two's head hadn't gone flying. The instant it'd been severed, his hand had pressed it down from above—the same way Braujou had saved himself from Glencalibur's attack. The mark from his decapitation vanished in the blink of an eye.

"This is bothersome. I could probably cut him to pieces and not fare any better. Hmm, I bet I could boil or fry him, and he still wouldn't die," Braujou mused, scratching the side of his nose with the butt of his spear. "D, this bastard has your face, too. Do something about him!"

While this request to "do something" probably put D in a difficult position, it would also be accurate to say he wasn't entirely unconnected to the matter.

"There are two Valcuas. There are two of me. Does that mean Valcua is me, and I am Valcua?"

When the cryptic youth made that equally cryptic remark, Sue suddenly looked up, and her cheeks immediately flushed.

"That's not all there are," the Ultimate Noble said in a voice that seemed to rumble from the depths of the earth. "There's one other. D, are you sure you don't know why the Sacred Ancestor would give me

this character?"

"Why do you think I would?"

"Didn't you just say it yourself? That I am you. And isn't there something else that you *didn't* say? That I am the Sacred Ancestor."

Sue was reeling. Valcua's words had a great impact on her; her head was swimming so badly she had to shut her eyes. *I am the Sacred Ancestor*. Who was that *I* supposed to be? Was it Valcua, or was it . . .

"See to his wound," D said.

"Hey!" Braujou shouted, making his objection known.

"We get Sue and Matthew. That's the price."

"Come here. Heal me."

Seemingly guided by Valcua's request, the stranger with his face went over to the genuine article and put his hand against the grand duke's chest. Valcua treating Valcua—the sight was both strange and disturbing, but no one there was amused or frightened.

And then everyone heard an unexpected remark: "I can't fix this."

"What?" Valcua exclaimed, raising an eyebrow, while Count Braujou's lips twisted into a grin.

"This wound was dealt by someone with skill equal to my own. He cut through not only flesh and bone, but through the fount of life. No one, god or demon, can help you now."

The count laughed. One Valcua had declared that the other Valcua was untreatable. Undeniably, there was a strange kind of humor to that.

"So, what are we supposed to do? Could D heal it?" Valcua asked, his voice charged with pain. It sounded like he was cross-examining his other self.

"He's the same as me. He can't heal you."

"What then?"

"The other me—*he* might be able to."

Though that answer was perfectly ordinary, it turned Sue's spine to ice.

"Then bring him out!"

"I'm not in control of him. There's no telling what he might do."

"What's all this talk about another you and not being in control of someone?" the count said. "D, I can't wait any longer. Valcua's lying right there. This is the perfect opportunity. I'm going to dispose of him."

"Hey, don't do that!" the hoarse voice called out to stop Braujou, but its request wasn't heeded.

The Nobleman swung his great spear around and made a lightning-swift thrust at Valcua. When a silvery flash from below sent the head of the spear flying, the count growled, "What are you doing?" Flames fairly shot from his eyes as he glared at D.

"He'll pay his way," D answered.

"You son of a bitch—"

Rage filled his face and his weapon. The count swung his spear at D.

Holding his sword upright to parry the blow, D felt the terrific impact all the way up to his shoulder. As the Hunter leaped, his blade limned a blue arc.

Barely managing to parry a blow that looked like it was going to split both his head and his spear, Braujou raised his weapon directly overhead and whipped it toward the floor.

The hall shook. Sue let out a scream.

When D landed, along with a section of the falling ceiling, a fat crack opened at his feet. The marble floor he stepped on to avoid it crumbled, throwing D badly off balance. The long spear moved in a merciless streak toward his chest, and though D barely managed to knock it away, he couldn't assume a posture that would allow him to attack. Braujou continued his jabs, determined to keep the Hunter from having any breathing room. Dodging and parrying, D slid across the floor, his feet tormented with brief snatches of stability. The second he was on stable footing, the long spear would probably pierce his chest.

D's feet stopped moving. Braujou hauled back his spear. The moment of truth seared itself into Sue's retinas in slow motion.

The dance of life and death came to a sudden halt. Both men turned in the same direction simultaneously. And Sue followed their eyes as well.

Dressed in silvery raiment, a man she'd never seen before stood before them. A man whose mere presence was enough to put an end to D and Count Braujou's deadly battle.

"O Sacred Ancestor!"

Sue didn't know who said this, but she gave herself over to the feelings the ring of the words stirred in her. Scalding heat scorched her heart, and bitter cold froze her organs. A million thoughts crowded her mind, and every time she managed to focus it again, chaos ensued, just from those words.

"So, the other one—that was the *great one*?" Count Braujou said, his tone one of piety. "In that case, he can do anything. Even save Valcua."

"It's you . . . milord." Valcua's tone was also stuporous. He'd said *milord*. His nemesis had banished him to outer space, but the grand duke couldn't help but address him with respect. Out in the universe, colossal nebulae were born, absorbing whole constellations—and this was akin to that.

From nowhere in particular, something like fog began to flood the

room.

"It's a fragment of the akashic record," the Sacred Ancestor said. "Someone has managed to get a peek at it, though its contents are difficult to decipher even for me. But that which isn't meant to be seen truly shouldn't be seen. Having broken that taboo, the person's existence is erased from history. And now look! The akashic record seeps from the vault, and the universe as we know it may end. The history carved into that space-time is vanishing. Because history is made of time."

By this point, the existence of the man called Kima had been wiped from Valcua's brain, and also from the memories of every living creature that knew him.

"How horrible!" Count Braujou said, his expression growing pale.

"That can't happen," Valcua said, squeezing his hand into a fist.

"What can I do, Sacred Ancestor?" Braujou asked.

"You can't do anything."

"Excuse me?"

"For that matter, it's probably beyond Valcua too. The only one here who might be able to help is the man called D. Even I can't tell how great his power might be. Valcua, do you wish to possess the same power as D?"

The grand duke was at a loss for words.

"D fought you, and he was able to heal the wound you dealt him. However, nothing save destruction awaits you now. And when that comes, you will have lost to D."

A voice that seemed to drag the psyches of any who heard it into a pit of darkness—was *this* the voice of the Sacred Ancestor?

However, Valcua laughed in a low voice, "Me lose? My defeat will come when someone reduces me to dust and scatters that dust in the wind. This isn't finished yet. D and I both still draw breath."

The Sacred Ancestor's right hand made a movement that looked like he was snatching something out of the air: a piece of the fog. Running his eyes over it, the Sacred Ancestor said, "It's recorded right here. It says quite clearly that you lose."

II

"Ridiculous!" Valcua boomed. Still, the Ultimate Noble's confidence seemed shaken. "I don't believe that. Not as long as I can still stand on my own two feet."

"The pronouncements of the akashic record are fate itself," said the Sacred Ancestor. "No one can escape his fate . . . With the exception of one method, that is."

For a second, Valcua's eyes gave off a fierce gleam.

“Ah . . . and what’s that?” the hoarse voice asked.

“Rewriting the akashic record,” the Sacred Ancestor replied without hesitation.

“Rewrite it? Something already written in the akashic record?”

The cries of the hoarse voice, Braujou, and Valcua all sounded as one.

“But . . . who could do that?”

Their gazes focused on the face of the Sacred Ancestor.

“I alone. However, you *could* do it as we ll, Valcua—if I were to do this.”

No one knew when he’d moved to Valcua’s side. Or perhaps it was Valcua who’d gone over to him without even realizing it.

The two bodies overlapped.

“What in the—” Braujou shouted, his cry a showcase of overwhelming surprise and despair. The body of the Sacred Ancestor had slipped right into Valcua’s.

“That damn Valcua—is he getting the power of the Sacred Ancestor?”

It was Count Braujou who responded to the hoarse voice. His long spear leaped into action, but then a crimson streak pierced the count’s body. Valcua’s retainers had fired their beam cannons on the count, and every blast sank into his skin or clothes.

As the fusillade continued, Braujou’s long spear limned an arc. The flashes reversed direction. The retainers they penetrated were instantly reduced to ions—all of the deadly flashes had been deflected back at them by the head of Count Braujou’s spear.

“He must be slain now!” the count exclaimed, the words spilling from him like a gout of blood as fierce determination clung to his face. The count knew exactly what this weird unification would mean.

Though he was well within striking distance, he simply couldn’t follow through. Adjusting his grip on the spear, he prepared to hurl it.

Valcua balled his right hand into a fist and raised it. His fingers opened just in front of his chest. A crimson sphere less than two inches in diameter floated there.

The long spear flew. It could have penetrated Valcua’s heart, but it scored a direct hit on the sphere instead. As it did so, the great twenty-foot spear never slowed down, and the crimson sphere swallowed it up.

“This is the Sacred Ancestor’s—I mean *my*—blood sphere,” Valcua told them in a tone of wonder. His wounded abdomen had ceased bleeding. “In days long past, the Sacred Ancestor was my sworn foe. The reason for that you wouldn’t know. I wasn’t simply some bloodthirsty fiend. Everything I did was in rebellion against the Sacred Ancestor—but I don’t expect you to believe that.”

His eyes turned to D, and then bored through Braujou. They weren't the eyes of the old Valcua.

"I—" he began to say, and then he squinted. His gaze was focused on the doorway far to the rear of Braujou.

Braujou turned around.

A pair of figures was standing there.

"Miranda?" he said with a sort of nostalgia.

"Matthew!" Sue said, barely squeezing his name out. "Matt—I'm so glad you're here!"

"I got him out of prison," Miranda informed them, shooting a scornful glance at Matthew to her left. He carried a large crossbow.

"I snuck into the castle through the basement. Fooling the defense systems was child's play. And in one of those subterranean cells I found this boy. I've had nothing but trouble every time I meet this man—I mean, this *child*. I was going to leave him to his fate, but since that seemed too cruel I brought him with me. I even armed him with a weapon from one of the guards. So stay right there, and don't make a move."

Given the duchess's keen senses, it must have been quite easy for her to find the group here.

Her pale visage turned toward Braujou. Her face had a red line running between the eyes to the tip of her chin. Her favorite white dress was stained red.

"I heard what you were talking about. Braujou, there's no longer any way to stop this bastard Valcua. Now that he has the power of the Sacred Ancestor, not even D could do that. As a result, we must combine our powers now."

She was so lovely, and her words so shocking. This beauty had been bisected from the crotch to the top of her head. Just look. Step by step she moved toward Valcua, but at her feet she left a vivid trail of blood. As she walked, her right hand reached down the neck of her dress. When Braujou saw what it held when it came out again, he let out an astonished groan.

It was a blood-smeared but still beating heart.

"I shall go first—Braujou, you follow after."

And saying this, Miranda poised herself to throw. A great shudder ran through her body. The sounds of a spring discharging and an arrow knifing through the air came after. Deep red spread from the spot where an iron arrow jutted from the left side of her chest.

"Matt?" Sue said, staring in disbelief at her brother as he stood with the crossbow leveled.

"No . . . I can't let you throw that . . . at the great Valcua."

The possessed look in Matthew's eyes told of the influence the Ultimate Noble still had over him. However, shooting an arrow into a

Noble who was trying to save him for the sake of another Noble who wanted him dead was simply too great an act of treachery.

Still clutching the arrow, Miranda took one step forward, then another. Her gait was steady. Turning to Matthew, she laughed.

"You can't slay me without running me through the heart. And my heart is right here," she said, and as she did, she swung her right arm.

Her heart collided with Valcua's tiny sphere, disappearing in a terrific burst of white light.

"Braujou, I leave the rest to you!"

And then she tumbled forward in her red dress and moved no more. The instant her heart was gone, her immortal life reached its conclusion.

After watching her meet this unnatural end, Braujou turned a terrible gaze on Matthew. "Am I to defend this wretched human?" he said, spitting the words like so much gore.

The count bit his lips. His teeth tore through them, spilling bright blood.

"As a Noble I shall keep my word. D, I leave the two of them in your care!"

His massive form kicked off the ground.

Matthew, who undoubtedly remained out of his mind, took aim at the count and fired an arrow at the speed of sound.

A silvery flash intercepted the missile in midair, becoming D's blade as he landed in front of Matthew and struck the boy over the head with the flat of his sword.

As Braujou bounded, his hand raised a longsword with a ten-foot blade. He must've had it under his robe. He brought the blade straight down on Valcua's head, but the second the Ultimate Noble blocked it with his left hand, the weapon vanished. That was the work of the other little ball that floated in front of Valcua's left hand—another blood sphere.

"So, I'm really no match for him? Well, my blood has a few tricks of its own!"

Braujou did an about-face. Turning his back on the Ultimate Noble, he reached his left hand out toward D.

"Lend me your sword!"

D threw him the same longsword that had laid out Matthew. Catching it, the count used both hands to take it in a reverse grip.

"Valcua, this is from Miranda and me!"

With a shout that shook heaven and earth, the count stabbed the blade into his own body. Its tip went through him and stretched toward Valcua's heart with calculated precision.

The Ultimate Noble seemed to be waiting for this, moving his

blood sphere up to meet it as if it were a force field. The tip of the sword was stained with gore—there was a sound like a pop as the blood sphere vanished, and the deadly blade proceeded right on target to pierce Valcua's heart, the same blade that had pierced Braujou's heart and absorbed his blood.

A shout that was nothing shy of a death rattle flew from Valcua's throat, and then he fell flat on his back. Grabbing the blade with both hands, he tried to extract it. Given the girth of Braujou's chest and the distance between the two men, the grand duke couldn't have had more than eight inches of the blade in him. But it didn't come out. Not only that—

"Well, I'll be! It's still sinking into him, isn't it?"

Just as the hoarse voice had indicated, Valcua's struggles were in vain as D's sword—covered with Braujou's blood—slowly but surely sank into the men's overlapped forms.

His strength perhaps spent, Valcua took his right hand away from the blade and reached up into the air. It snatched at the drifting fog. A second passed, then two—and the hand fell limply.

Sue raced over to D. Before showing any concern for Matthew, she said, "I wonder if he's dead."

The first words out of her mouth were what concerned her the most: Valcua.

"Nope," the left hand said curtly. "He's still clenching his fist."

When Sue's eyes finally focused on Valcua's hand and the bit of white that spilled from it, the Ultimate Noble's eyes opened and gave off a golden light. The light shot up into the void. Like a magnificent but vain attempt to contact extraterrestrial life, it connected the dark heavens with the earth.

"Take Matthew and go outside," D told her, pulling out needles of plain wood and hurling them at Valcua's heart. They struck him, or at least they appeared to for a second, and then they reversed direction and were stopped by the left arm D held up. The five needles stuck in him from the wrist to the elbow, and bright blood coursed out.

When D lowered his arm, he looked over at Valcua. He stood like an angry deity with Braujou's longsword-skewered corpse at his feet and his face turned up to the void.

In a tone that carried true astonishment, the hoarse voice said, "This clown took the part of the akashic record that shows his death and squashed it in his hand."

"Precisely," Valcua responded. His voice was transmitted directly to D's brain without his lips ever moving. "I've acquired telepathy. Do you know how? It was given to me by creatures in another galaxy using a hyperlight communications system faster than a laser. Oh, here comes another one! It seems they simply can't restrain their

desire to make their existence known and share their knowledge and power."

D ran. The Ultimate Noble was getting powers from extraterrestrial civilizations. He had to be destroyed before he truly became the ultimate form of life!

As the Hunter dashed, his right hand reached down. Getting a grip on the longsword with his fingertips, he made what was literally a do-or-die strike—driving the sword hilt-deep into Valcua's heart.

For a second, the hyperlight communication ceased.

"Ah, the power's leaving me. So, this is how Glencalibur feels?"

Valcua's magic sword pierced its own master.

"Destroyed," Valcua said, staggering. "I am destroyed . . . No, I would've been destroyed . . . once upon a time. D, I've received the power of immortality from countless millions of miles away."

Without a sound, Glencalibur flew straight at D. The instant that D got a grip on its hilt to stop it, Valcua slowly opened the eyes he'd had shut. His eyes had no pupils, just a golden glow.

III

"I can manipulate the akashic record as I choose, tapping the knowledge of the universe—I'm more than just a living being now, D," Valcua said, his voice clear and resounding.

In the depths of the white fog a golden light glowed. The leak from the record was growing stronger.

"What are you, then?" D asked. Valcua's declaration should've been shocking, but neither it nor the mysterious vigor that accompanied it seemed to shake the young man's psyche in the least.

"What you see before you—call me an *entity*."

"Are you trying to say you're the pinnacle of evolution?" the hoarse voice said, adding in a sneering tone, "Another name for that might be *has-been*."

Valcua's eyes stared at the Hunter's left hand.

"Gaaaaah!" it screamed, its tiny face sinking back into the palm at the same time D made a horizontal swipe with Glencalibur at Valcua's neck. Though the Hunter felt it make contact, the grand duke didn't fall. A minor spasm passed through D's right hand. It was a very bizarre reaction. Searing pain burned in his brain.

As the young man in black fell backward without a word, Valcua said, "Ah, the death throes of one so beautiful are an entertaining sight. However, that's just proof that I haven't yet become the Ultimate Noble. The fact that something like beauty can still affect me . . ."

While D was down on one knee mastering his pain, Sue ran over

to him, saying, “D—hang on!”

When she turned to look at Valcua, her eyes glistened with tears.

“Stop it already! Count Braujou and Ms. Miranda are both gone now, all to protect us. Just quit it. I don’t care what happens to me! Once I go to see my mother, it’ll all be over. Just let him live!”

Shrouded in fog, Valcua listened to her admirable plea, coming like a cry from her very soul. He nodded.

“That’s a good attitude to have. And my aim was the two of you. Very well, I shall spare D. However, D, you have to drink the girl’s blood. If you do, I’ll guarantee your survival.”

Tears spilled from Sue’s eyes as if forced out of her. And the light that shone through those tears was one of pure anger.

What a heartless demand, to have the person who wanted to defend Sue drink the blood of the very girl he should’ve saved!

“No, no, no!” Sue cried, shaking her head madly. The Noble before her eyes was someone she absolutely could not accept. The moment Matthew had raised his hand against Miranda, she’d been freed of his brainwashing. “Aren’t you supposed to be the ultimate? You’re just—just a monster that got more power than it deserved. Why, you can’t even control your power properly.”

“I can’t? You say Valcua can’t control his own power? This is most bizarre . . .”

Golden eyes with no pupils glared at Sue, and a part of the fog drifted in front of them.

“Ah, the akashic record informs me that something interesting is about to occur. Humans don’t give up easily either, I guess.”

The grand duke raised his right foot.

At that moment, somewhere, a certain button was pushed. The megaquake generator located six miles beneath the Capital sent a transmission of a massive earthquake to the northern Frontier at light speed, and said message was opened directly beneath the center of that sector—at a depth of a scant hundred yards. One trillion joules of energy was considered sufficient power to level not only Valcua’s kingdom, but also the entirety of the northern Frontier.

Lowering his foot gently, Valcua said, “This brings to a conclusion my relations with the human race.”

At that instant, the megaquake energy vanished without a trace.

Here was a Noble who could make an asteroid disappear or negate vast subterranean energies—he even had the power to rewrite the history of the universe as he saw fit. Who could slay him? Who could even fight him?

“Dear me, at some point I’ve become inured to the Hunter’s beauty. Very good. D, drink her blood. Then you may leave this land

as if nothing ever happened and continue hunting Nobility. I'll have nothing further to do with the humans now. Here in my castle I shall explore the wisdom of the universe for all eternity."

Sue felt something clamp down on her shoulders with substantial strength. She didn't want to know how the face of the young man behind her appeared as he looked at her.

"It's okay, D," the girl said, and then she glared at Valcua. "You still have something against me. Until you move beyond those feelings, you'll never be the ultimate anything!"

"D," Valcua said, prodding the Hunter. "It's written in the akashic record. Your fate is to do exactly as I told you. Go ahead and drink."

Sue shut her eyes.

A white fog drifted through their world.

Hot breath fell on the nape of Sue's neck.

I knew his breath would be warm, she thought.

A mysterious peace of mind enveloped Sue.

Her right shoulder grew lighter unexpectedly. Reaching his hand out before him, D had caught hold of something.

"No! You—" Valcua cried out in shock.

He saw two points of light blazing from the depths of the fog, so red they froze his blood—they were D's eyes.

"You—you son of a bitch," the grand duke stammered. "You can change the akashic record?"

Sue felt the warmth of the hand that rested on her left shoulder. There was no mistaking the strong palm of the hand of the man who'd kept her safe.

"You've played me false!" Valcua shouted, although whom that was directed at was unclear.

Crouching down, he grabbed D's sword from where it lay in the ashes of Braujou's chest. Above him, the vision of beauty in black was descending. In the eyes of both Valcua and Sue, he looked for all the world like some gorgeous supernatural bird. Then there was a gleam of silver—and the sharp clang of steel meeting steel.

Valcua held his blade horizontally overhead, while D stood poised as if chopping wood. The fog split vertically, and in exactly the same fashion Valcua's head opened down the middle all the way to the throat.

Discarding his blade, Valcua used his hands to press his head back together again. His flesh closed. When he opened his mouth, a number of red spheres spilled out, drifting toward D.

In D's hands, Glencalibur zipped out and the blood spheres fell to the ground, where they scattered in ordinary splashes of red.

"You must hear me out," Valcua said.

Splitting open from the top of his head to between the eyes, the

grand duke had a vermilion line from the bridge of his nose down to his lips that would no longer fade away. With every word Valcua spoke, the gap grew wider and blood bubbled out. His robe was no longer golden.

"Listen to me, D," the Ultimate Noble continued. "I was created by the Sacred Ancestor. And he told me something: That I was his only success. I didn't know what that meant. It was five thousand years later that I became crazed with slaughter after the meaning of those words and the hopelessness of my fate came to me. He told me then he *didn't* consider me his only success. He'd given that title to someone else, he said. And he told me what fate lay in store for me. Knowing that, I had to fight, had to kill to live. D, so long as we can be destroyed, no Noble can be the ultimate!"

His face split, and the blood that flowed out splattered on the floor. His grip had loosened. The power of Grand Duke Valcua—the Ultimate Noble—was now nearly spent.

Suddenly, he looked up. There were a hundred billion stars in the night sky.

"While I was in exile out there, I learned a great many things—about the Nobility, about humans, about their feelings . . . D, I didn't even want to return to Earth."

Coughing harshly, he spat up blood. In midair the blood became a tiny sphere that glided without making a sound—toward Sue.

"Who brought you back?" D asked.

"There is only one person who could've. The bastard intended to see me slain. I see that now. Because he's inside of me. Perhaps he was afraid that if he left me out there in the depths of space I might come back someday. Or perhaps he feared I might become a threat to the universe itself. He brought me back after five thousand years, D, because *you* were here. A man who could slay the Ultimate Noble—his only success."

It was unclear whether he noticed the blood sphere, but D didn't move a muscle. Nor did Sue. Fresh tears filled her eyes.

Turning his right hand around, Valcua made a sweeping motion. The blood sphere burst.

"Ah, at long last," the Ultimate Noble cried out to the void. His eyes and even his countenance glowed with superhuman joy. "I have moved beyond hate. Your wish has been granted, O Sacred Ancestor! I am finally the Ultimate Noble—"

A heartbeat later, his body split vertically, collapsing on the spot with a fountain of blood that seemed to turn the place into a sea of red.

"He was a success," D muttered in a low voice.

"No, a failure," a voice said.

The strange man was standing in the spot where Valcua had stood. He had the face of the Sacred Ancestor, but at the same time it also looked like Valcua's face, and D's.

"You were my only success," he said. "But that's not to say you're perfect yet. Your spirit is strong but too soft. And that is why—"

D sensed someone to his rear.

"Matthew?"

"What's he doing?" D asked, never taking his eyes off the man.

"Where are you going?" Sue asked, her eyes catching an image of Matthew going deeper and deeper into the fog.

"He's headed toward the vault and the akashic record," the man said. "The boy has part of my—which is to say, Valcua's—nature still planted in his brain. Perpetuating my will, he'll most likely modify the record by force. I might yet live again and change the world."

Taking Sue under one arm, D broke into a run. Beyond the fog spraying toward him, he could make out a hazy black figure.

"D, if it comes to that, and I mean *if*," Sue said, looking up in desperation, "if there's no way to make Matthew his old self again, and he tries to mess with the akashic record . . ."

Her voice dying out, Sue bit down on her lip.

"I entered a contract to protect the two of you."

Though fog lay on all sides of him, D could tell they were in a tremendously vast place. He couldn't feel any weight in his left hand. And there was no trace of Sue. Human beings couldn't enter the vault of the akashic record.

Matthew was up ahead. To the naked eye, he seemed to be thirty feet away. However, the distance was actually infinite.

Clawing with both hands, Matthew tore at the fog.

D ran without saying a word.

Matthew turned in his direction. His lips were twisted into a grin.

"Stay back, D," he said, straightening himself up. "You understand, don't you? I obtained part of the Sacred Ancestor's power. And the great Valcua, too, is within me. Alone, there's nothing you can do. Ha! I can read this. I can read the whole akashic record. Valcua is telling me to resurrect him—but what the Sacred Ancestor has to say is even more incredible. He says I should erase this world completely from the record. Interesting, isn't it, D? Which should I do?"

Matthew grinned. He'd been warped from the very beginning, before the Sacred Ancestor or Valcua had come into his life. However, the reason they entered him and he obeyed them was because his will was weak, as anyone could see. Lusting after Sue, he'd been able to fight back his urges and pretend to be a good older brother only because his mother had been there. When that great weight had been

lifted from him and his true self had been unleashed, he found that he didn't mind being a servant of the Nobility. The Nobility had knowledge and power. And when they gave him those gifts, he'd displayed the typical weakling's reaction by laughing haughtily.

He could read the record. The past, present, and future of everything in the universe . . .

"Ah, yes. D, let's see who you really are."

A fiendish look spread across Matthew's face, and he stuck his right hand out in front of his chest, plucking a bit of fog from the air. He could pull whatever he liked from the record at any place and time.

As Matthew stared at the fog, his expression changed immediately.

"Impossible . . . It can't be!" the boy exclaimed, his surprise so great his face wore a look of utter stupefaction as he stared at D.

The Hunter had closed to within six feet of him, but Matthew wasn't worried. He knew although it appeared to the naked eye to be six feet, the space between them was infinite.

"What are you going to do about Sue?" D asked.

"Sue? Who's that? All that aside, I'm surprised . . . Don't tell me you . . . Oh, *Sue*? I have plans for her. I'm going to take her at my leisure. I'm changing the record to reflect that. Actually, you're going to cut me down here, but I'll change that too. Don't worry. I'll arrange it so that after I've had my way with her, she bites off her own tongue and dies—"

As the boy laughed uncontrollably, a silvery flash zipped to the end of his nose.

"What the—" Matthew exclaimed, reeling back and putting his hand to the tip of his nose. Something red dripped from it.

"You cut me?" he said, purple madness turning to white fear. "How could you cut me? Between you and me, there must be—"

His eye burned with red reflected from D's eyes. Eyes narrowed with rage, fangs peeking from vermilion lips—it was clearly the face of a vampire.

"Stop, D! You really are the Sacred Ancestor's own—"

The boy's words were cut short by a stark flash of light.

As he heard the sound of Matthew's body falling, D turned his gaze to where the boy's head lay at his feet.

"He brought it on himself," the hoarse voice was heard to comment wearily. "But that means your contract—well, that can't be helped, can it?"

"I'll uphold the contract," D said.

"Excuse me?"

Around that dubious voice and the vision of beauty, the white fog

eddied both lovingly and fearfully.

About a month later, the Capital dispatched yet another survey party to Valcua's kingdom. The vast expanse of land dotted with stands of trees that they found there was the Frontier, plain and simple. However, in the rocky region in the center of that wilderness they discovered a tiny red sphere and a longsword half-buried beneath boulders, and both of these items were eerily heavy. When the combined efforts of all their trailer trucks didn't budge them an inch, the men could only take pictures and leave them where they were. The wind that blew from the far reaches of the endless gray wilderness made the survey party tremble to the last man, and later they would question if it all hadn't been a dream. Of course, they had no way of knowing that everything in the kingdom that had existed in that region a month earlier was packed into that sphere.

Five years later, Sue left her hometown and the farm she had made an unqualified success through impressive teamwork, traveling to the eastern Frontier to be married to the owner of a musical-instrument shop. Matthew took a red-haired girl as his wife. She was a city girl, and though she wasn't strong, she had a warm heart.

"I don't know if I'm good enough for you," a bashful-looking man three years Sue's senior told the girl.

Smiling, Sue said, "My late mother told me to marry someone like you, you know."

And then, in her heart of hearts, she suddenly found herself asking, *But was that really what happened?*

After working with Matthew to slay the Ultimate Noble, doubts occasionally rose in her mind like ripples on a pond. There was something different about all this. As if it weren't the way her life had *really* gone. Such suspicions would undoubtedly cling to her all her life, and Sue understood that she simply had to accept it. Throughout her life with the man she loved, those doubts might be a heavy load to bear. She didn't let that stop her.

Presently she got married, had children, raised a family, and heard that Matthew had died. And as she grew old, Sue sometimes had a strange dream. In it, an impossibly beautiful young man in black was watching her intently from the depths of a white fog. Though his gaze was stern and icy, Sue wasn't afraid. Whenever she saw him, her heart raced like a young girl's. And every time, without fail, she told him the same thing: *It's okay. I had a happy life. Just like my mother wanted.*

And with that a faint smile skimmed across the lips of that gorgeous young man, and every time she had the dream, Sue was

proud to have put it there. It was just such a smile.

END

POSTSCRIPT

When I was writing the third and fourth parts of *Tyrant's Stars*, I began to develop a new interest in D's world. Up until then, it was a topic I'd only given halfhearted consideration, but I started to want to really flesh out what the world had been like when vampires ruled the human race. The vampires—or the Nobility—first appeared as a force greater than humanity after the nuclear war. The story line of the D series jumps forward ten thousand years from that point, omitting much about how the Nobility had controlled the human race. Not that it was boring or anything; I just hadn't given it much thought. (*Laughs*) A nuclear war brought about the vampires' sudden rise to power, and in those days, it seemed like such an exchange might occur at any time between the US and the Soviet Union. The difference between then and now is like night and day; the nuclear weapons remain, but we believe no such war will take place. At the time, I'd probably have had the vampires take control after the human race, nearly wiped out by nuclear war, is saved by the secretly developed technology and magical power of the vampires, to whom the radiation is no more than a light shower. But in return, the humans would have had to allow the vampires to feed on them.

At present, the Frontier inhabited by the humans is divided into northern, southern, eastern, and western sectors, each with assorted feudal lords or controllers. Count Magnus Lee, who appears in the first novel, is one such person. In the ten thousand years leading up to the decline of the Nobility as a race, there were a few vampire rulers that even the humans lauded, the most praised among them being Lord Greylancer of the northern Frontier and Baron Mayerling of the western Frontier. The former I used in the most recent Japanese volume of the D series, *Nightmare Village*, while the latter appears in the third book, *Demon Deathchase*. Now, I've taken both of them and thrown them back into the world of the past. That is the crux of the *Another Vampire Hunter: The Noble Greylancer* series that I've just started writing in Japan. Set in the thousands of years when the Nobility were locked in heated battle with the intergalactic invaders known as the Outer Space Beings (OSB), it vividly depicts the lives of humans and Nobles on the Frontier. No plans have been made to translate it yet, but I hope those of you who understand Japanese will read it in its original form. As the author, I can highly recommend it.

Although the vampires are ageless and immortal, they aren't indestructible. They have numerous lethal weaknesses, such as sunlight, running water, wooden stakes, and so on. Naturally, the Nobility would think of measures to guard against these things, and the humans would undoubtedly conceive of ways around those

safeguards. Surely there would be individuals willing to lead rebel armies equipped with those new weapons. And while the rebels might be ruthlessly crushed, there still might be some Nobles who couldn't help but be moved by their courage and humanity. These are the kind that can be found in *Tyrant's Stars*. And although this has turned into a plug for my new series, I have faith that you've found *Tyrant's Stars* quite interesting. I hope you enjoyed it.

February 21, 2011
While watching Dracula: Prince of Darkness
Hideyuki Kikuchi

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 18

Fortress of the Elder God

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming in Fall 2012
from Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing

TRAVELERS ON A SKYBUS

CHAPTER 1

I

Apparently the waiting room was poorly maintained, and biting drafts crisscrossed its not particularly spacious interior. You might even say the wind seemed to be showing off. It was better than being outside, however, as the warmth from a battered atomic heater offset the cold, and there was no howl from the wind. If the roar of the engines had been audible, it actually would've completed the picture.

There were ten passengers in the waiting room. For an airport situated in a hick town in the eastern Frontier, it certainly had drawn a mixed bunch. There wasn't even a single example of those whom it served the most—farmers.

A young woman draped in a metallic stole walked over to the window, hair as golden as the fibers swaying as she did so.

"Looks like they're done loading the baggage. Guess we'll be boarding pretty soon," she said. Her remarks weren't addressed to anyone in particular.

A man with a crew cut who'd been fidgeting with a deck of playing cards and an old man and woman who appeared to be husband and wife looked at her, but all three held their silence. The man with the crew cut was young—undoubtedly under thirty—and he had a crescent-shaped scar running down his right cheek. Judging by the way he'd repeatedly tried to strike up a conversation with the young woman, he seemed pleasant enough, but he was clearly a mobster. The front of his synthetic-leather jacket was open, revealing his gun belt and the broadsword tucked through it.

"Any time now. Being able to get to the Capital in six hours is handy," the mobster began, and wiping the smile from his face, he ran his eyes over the group until they bored through a trio seated in the opposite corner. "The only drawback is you don't get to pick who you fly with."

The object of this frank remark was an individual who remained completely motionless, an opaque black-canvas hood covering his eyes, and a pair of hands bound by handcuffs resting in his lap. Instead, it was the men to either side of him that shot the mobster vicious looks—one of them a big, bearded man with a sheriff's badge pinned to the chest of his shirt, the other a much younger man wearing the uniform of a police officer from the Capital. The younger one had a metal cylinder strapped to his back, and a gold badge glittered on the chest of his leather coat.

A policeman from the Capital had come to take custody of a criminal captured in the Frontier, and a sheriff had joined him in that

task as part of his duty—the situation would be clear to anyone at a glance. There was one other obvious assumption to be made—most of the criminals who wore hoods to protect themselves from the sun weren't human.

Turning to the elderly couple, the mobster said, "You folks drew the short straw. You're out enjoying a nice family trip, only to have a suckling spoil it all. Ain't that right, kid?"

Though he was looking for agreement from the boy who sat next to the elderly couple, the child didn't nod at this, or move a muscle, or even glance in the mobster's direction. Apparently he was being transferred from one orphanage to another, and though he'd had a nun with him earlier, at some point she'd disappeared. Since entering the waiting room, the boy hadn't uttered a single word. Maybe the nun had given up, because she'd held her tongue as well, and a coldness had hung between the two of them that suggested they were glad to be rid of each other. The fox-faced nun seemed to have her own issues, but from the look of the boy's threadbare navy-blue overcoat, tightly wrapped muffler, drooping head, and nice-looking but pale face, anyone could see why someone would give up on him.

The rest of the people there glanced his way from time to time out of concern for his quasi-autistic condition and because his vacant, half-shut blue eyes would suddenly start gleaming. Most of them thought the same thing: *People would pay money to see a boy with beautiful eyes like that. No point putting him on a skybus that flies over the Playground.*

Unable to get any validation from the boy, the mobster clucked his tongue. There was one other person present, but he didn't even look at him, let alone say anything. The man seemed to have something unearthly about him. With a crimson cape and a scarf of the same hue, he seemed to be ablaze. He had a hard face, like sculpted bronze, and despite his wardrobe he didn't seem the frivolous type. When he'd entered the waiting room, he hadn't taken one of the many empty seats; rather, he stood by the door, his left hand resting lightly on the hilt of his longsword. One didn't need to see that his blade was longer and heavier than those usually used for self-defense to know that he was a combat professional—he carried himself like a warrior. The strangest thing about him was the quiver he had on his back—it was stuffed full of arrows, but he didn't have a bow. Ordinarily, everyone else would've eyed him with suspicion, but it was completely the opposite. Whenever the elderly couple looked at him, they exchanged looks of relief and nodded to each other. Because there was a suckling there.

"Here comes the pilot!" the woman said, and this time everyone—except the warrior—looked out the window.

From the fat, cigar-shaped craft parked on the distant runway, a man in a flight suit was approaching. The pilot looked at his wristwatch as he told them, “Get onboard, please. Well, I’ll be damned. We’re only thirty minutes behind schedule.”

Before the passengers headed out, their eyes focused on the hooded man in handcuffs. However, when the sheriff tugged on the thin line attached to those cuffs, the suckling got up without any resistance and proceeded outside where only wintry sunlight and bare trees waited, with one lawman before him and the other behind.

To either side of the cramped central aisle there were ten rows of seats, three to a row. First aboard, the woman took an aisle seat in the foremost row, and was sipping the contents of a small liquor bottle when along came the same mobster from earlier.

“Sorry, baby, but could you scoot over a bit?”

When that well-tanned face bared its pearly white teeth to her, the woman responded with a wry look of undisguised annoyance.

“There are plenty of other empty seats. I don’t want you crowding me.”

“Oh, don’t be that way. To make a long story short, we’re taking our lives in our hands during this flight. If I’m gonna die, I wanna be beside a lovely lady. Humor me, okay?”

More than his forceful approach, it was probably his carefree smile that changed the woman’s mind. Swinging her legs into the aisle, she said, “Take the window seat.”

“That’s mighty kind of you. I’m Jan.”

“And I’m not giving you my name,” the woman said, downing the contents of her little silver cup.

The man—Jan—quickly made his way to the window seat and was fastening the rubber seat belt when he gave her a funny look and a smile and said, “No problem, Maria, baby!”

The woman’s expression changed.

“Your stole. It’s embroidered there.”

“Oh, this thing?” the woman replied, looking down at one end where the metallic threads were coming loose. “That’s not my name. It belongs to the woman who lost it to me at the gaming tables. She was a fat farmer’s wife.”

“Well, that’s okay. If it doesn’t bother you none, I’ll still call you that.”

“Suit yourself. Whether you know my name or not won’t make a bit of difference.”

The engine began to growl.

Peeking back between the seats, Jan said to Maria, “Strange mix we got here. Don’t you think?”

Apparently he made a habit of soliciting agreement from other people. As the woman made no reply but rather kept drinking as if in a foul mood, he went on talking.

"That kid's keeper never did come back. For a nun, of all people, to pull something so irresponsible, either the kid's got his act together so well there's no need to worry, or it's the complete opposite. My take on it is, he's a major problem child. When no one sees you off, it's because they just want you gone. I don't know if he's got someone waiting for him on the other end, but he'd be a handful for anyone, that's for sure. I mean, that nun was from the freaking Shillonget Monastery. To get tossed out of there, you'd have to be a real piece of work. There's a medallion around his neck. It's probably got all the details carved into it, and I wouldn't mind a peek at that."

While the mobster was blithering, the skybus had slowly started to glide down the runway. The scenery—a mossy old landing strip, decaying hangars, and a distant mountain range—began to race past the windows faster and faster.

While Jan gave his tongue a rest, the aircraft made expert use of rising air currents to climb to sixteen thousand feet and enter the jet stream.

"It looks like we're in, all right," the old man looking out the window said softly to his wife, who sat beside him with her hands pressed to her chest. "Now it's just a straight shot to the Capital. Pare should be meeting us at the airport. Are you in pain, dear?"

"I'm fine," his elderly wife replied, a smile gracing her paling face. "This happens every time. But will Pare really be coming?"

"Of course. I wrote to him, and we got a reply at the hotel, didn't we? He's a good boy, that one is. Unlike Depp."

"Depp is just honest, that's all. No one's happy to have over a couple of old relics like us, whether they're our sons or not."

"That's not true. After everything you and I did for those boys—"

Though the elderly man's hoary eyebrows arched, his wife replied wearily, "Pare's the kindest of the bunch. He won't come out and say it—but we're inconveniencing him. Once we're in the Capital, let's find a cheap hotel and stay there instead. That'd be easier on all of us."

"There's no need to do that. You know how hard we worked for __"

The old man's eyes were bulging, but he relaxed when he saw his wife's doleful expression. Taking a deep breath, he rolled back through his memories.

"Inge and Pages were both happy to see us, weren't they? Depp, well, that was another story, but Pare—"

Suddenly he noticed that his wife had opened her eyes and was

staring intently at him.

"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing," the old woman said with a sad shake of her head. She wanted to tell him he was wrong. "Not a thing. You're right. They've all been so good to us, haven't they?"

"They sure have."

Happy that his wife had finally agreed with him, the elderly man nodded repeatedly.

His aged wife managed to keep the hopeless smile on her face as she gazed at her husband, saying, "We pass over the Playground, don't we?"

It wasn't really a question. Though the old man sensed something terribly disconsolate in her tone, he'd long since lost the desire to try to discover what that was.

"Yes, we do," he replied, turning his gaze to the window again.

Their fourth son would be coming to meet them.

With unsettling creaks here and there, the skybus continued flying smoothly at a speed of 330 miles per hour.

A tiny whisper rose in the aircraft's silent interior: "Soon now." While it wasn't loud enough that the person in the neighboring seat could hear it, almost everyone there trembled.

At that instant, something happened—a heartbeat later, the skybus was thrown off balance, slipping from the jet stream and dropping toward the ground at an angle sharper than any dive.

II

"What in the *world*? He's kicked the bucket!"

Though he heard Maria say this, Jan didn't believe her, so he took the pilot's pulse and felt for a heartbeat before letting go of his wrist again.

"Now we don't have anyone to fly the skybus. Or am I wrong, and one of you can pilot this thing?"

The mobster looked over his shoulder at the survivors—all of the passengers—but naturally, there was no reply.

Apparently the nameless pilot had been highly skilled, taking the skybus from a fall that was essentially a vertical tailspin and pulling the nose up at the last minute for a landing that would've been considered miraculous on level ground, let alone this rocky expanse.

However, the miracle ended there, and the reality was that the passengers scattered across the rocks had sustained very real injuries. The old man's left arm had been broken, and after finally pulling the first-aid kit from the somewhat-damaged skybus, Maria and the sheriff were in the process of setting it in a splint. The policeman, who was

far younger than the sheriff, had suffered some bruising to his right shoulder, but he had nothing more than a damp cloth to put on it for the pain. The impact after their fall had left the liquid contents of the jar of painkillers splattered against the bottom of the kit.

Though both the boy and the warrior were unharmed, one had gone over to lean against a massive crag and not moved any further, while the other simply stood there scanning the area in all directions.

"Any of you folks familiar with the local geography?" the sheriff asked, looking over the group.

Grimacing, Jan said, "That'd have to be *you*."

"I suppose it would," the sheriff said, a wry look coming to his face, above his triple chins, before he surveyed their surroundings. He'd already looked the scenery over a good ten times, and not a blessed thing had changed. It was a wasteland strewn with boulders as far as the eye could see. There wasn't a speck of greenery, but there was plenty of wind to slice into them like a knife. It came across the distant yellow expanse of sand. Before them towered steep crags.

It was just past three o'clock Afternoon. Though there was still plenty of light, once that was gone it'd be like a winter's day in no time at all. It wouldn't even take an hour.

After checking the time with his wristwatch, the sheriff looked up at the sun to judge position, as was often done on the Frontier, giving a nod as he said, "We could pull the equipment out of the skybus to figure out where we are, but basically this is the center of the Playground. No matter which way we try to go, it'll be the same distance out of here."

"So which direction is the safest?" asked Jan. There was hostility in his tone. Lawmen were the sworn enemy of mobsters, after all.

"They're all the same," the sheriff answered off the cuff. "If the village where we boarded had a Danger Potential rating of one, this whole region would have to be over one hundred thousand DP."

"Then shouldn't we hurry up and head for the Capital?" the pale-faced policeman said with urgency. "Most of us are alive, and there's a little food and water left in the skybus. We should be trying to get out of this hellhole as fast as we can."

"You suggesting we cross the Playground without a car?" Jan jeered. "I'm sure you're a big man back in the Capital, but do you have any idea what kind of place the Nobility made this Playground of theirs? You know, I'm surprised we've lasted this long. They're already wise to us. If they wanted to, they could tear us to pieces right now. When you think about it, staying or going is pretty much the same."

The young policeman decided to meet the mobster head on. Eyes squinting angrily, he said, "I'd expect a lousy thug like you to be that ignorant. This is known as the E3 Playground, and aerial photos of

this region are taken on a regular basis. According to them, no life forms exist out here."

"Can they tell from the sky what's underground, buddy?" Jan snapped back. "Legend has it these things will wait thousands of years without moving a muscle, just biding their time until some stupid prey like us come into their domain. Aerial photos? Don't make me laugh!"

"You lousy smartass!"

The policeman used his uninjured left hand to go for the pistol on his weapons belt, while Jan said, "Hey, now," and reached for his broadsword. Tension coalesced around the two of them.

"That'll be enough of that," a rusty voice interrupted, and it sounded like a fitting arbitrator.

Everyone turned in unison toward the speaker, relieved expressions on their faces. *At last*, they thought.

"Until we get out of here, we need everyone we can get," the warrior said. His crimson scarf danced in the breeze.

The policeman twisted his lips as if to say, *Is this guy against me, too?* "This region is safe. There's nothing here. You're all frightened by unfounded legends."

"Those same legends will keep rescuers from coming," the warrior said.

This silenced the policeman.

Entry into the Playground for any reason was prohibited—parents weren't even allowed to run out there in search of a child who'd wandered into it. Going in to rescue a skybus that had made an emergency landing was out of the question. They could send a distress signal, shoot off flares, or even spell out *help* on the ground with their bodies, but still no one would come.

"The Playground is laid out as an almost-perfect circle three hundred miles in diameter. To cross it on foot, taking into account the speed of women and children, would take a good twenty days. And with the number of people we've got here, our food and water won't last two days, no matter how we ration it. That's why we can't afford to lose anyone to a stupid scuffle."

"Why not?" Maria asked, sounding slightly unsettled.

The answer was perfectly simple.

"We might have to eat them."

At this, everyone's expression became one of horror. No one could say a word.

Looking overhead, the warrior said, "The sun will be going down soon, and the temperature will drop below freezing. You lose a lot of strength then, too. So I'll thank you to see that we don't lose any possibly vital sources of nutrition."

"Guess we'll be camping out today," the sheriff groaned, looking

up at the sky.

Nodding, the warrior said, “Yes, and there’s one thing we have to take care of before we set out. You must know what that is. Why did our skybus go down?”

Up until this point, the elderly couple had been intently listening to what the warrior had to say, but as their eyes burned with curiosity, their expressions froze.

“What do you think, Ms. Maria?”

As the warrior singled her out, the woman turned away in a snit.

“I don’t care to have people use my name so freely. What’s yours, anyway?”

“Begging your pardon. I’m Bierce—a warrior.”

It was unclear if his response improved Maria’s mood any, because she continued to look away from him as she said, “I get the feeling I saw something, but I can’t remember anything about it. All I know is what I felt. And that was *fear* itself.”

That caused a stir in the group. Everyone—except the boy and the suckling—agreed with her.

“That’s right. That’s exactly what killed the pilot and made the skybus crash. But how did it happen?”

This time silence tightened around the group. At that moment, they once again felt the same “fear itself” that Maria had mentioned. Letting out an inhuman cry, the old woman clung to her husband. The mobster and the policeman closed their eyes and quaked as if fighting great pain, and beads of sweat rose on the sheriff’s face.

A terror that could smash through even the strongest mind. Where did such a thing come from?

“Sheriff, is there some kind of illness going around that airport?”

“An illness? No, nothing like that. Hell, not even plagues bother going to a dried-up hole in the wall like that.”

“Then it would have to be someone’s doing.”

Everyone stopped moving.

The warrior continued in his stoic tone, saying, “Odds are the culprit is among us.”

“Wait just a damn minute!” Jan interjected. “We have no way of knowing that. Any fool could picture what’d happen if you released a terror like that on a skybus in flight and the pilot went goofy. You’d go down too. You’d all be in the same boat!”

“Maybe the one who did it was just going after one person and didn’t use the power right. Or it could be the person in question doesn’t even know when it’s gonna happen.”

Everyone in the group turned their heads the same direction in unison. As always, the boy was staring down at the ground, and the suckling remained silent.

"You don't mean . . ."

Maria's groan was easily drowned out by the warrior as he asked, "Sheriff, does this suckling have a power like that?"

"No, not so far as I know," the sheriff stated flatly, but the way he looked at the prisoner was peculiar. "We didn't hear any talk about anything like that from the area where he ran amok. Nothing about infecting other people with fear."

"Not much is known about sucklings, on account of them always getting disposed of. Even if they *did* have a power like that, without the ability to control it, it wouldn't do a fat lot of good. They'd be put down before they ever got to use it."

The sheriff had no response. But the people envisioned a number of scenarios involving the suckling.

The policeman interrupted, saying, "Hey, don't get any funny ideas! Some of the top researchers in the Capital are waiting to experiment on this guy."

"I'm not saying he's the culprit," the warrior replied, his blue eyes focusing on someone else.

"Kid, can you talk?" he asked, but there was no reply. "Now, I've been watching everyone, but the only one who doesn't seem to have been changed by that fear is you. Or could it be you didn't even feel it in the first place?"

Was the warrior trying to say the boy was responsible?

"Answer me if you can. Because until we get this cleared up, there's no way we can let you come with us."

"Hey, hold it right there," the elderly man protested. "We don't know for sure that child's to blame. You just said so yourself, didn't you? It's not right, threatening a youngster like that!"

A stern rock of a face stared intently at the old man. The old man winced but managed to stand his ground.

"It seems to me you weren't born out on the Frontier, were you?"

The old man nodded. "Right, we hail from the Capital. We're traveling around now, visiting our children who live on the Frontier."

"I see. If you'd lived a decade on the Frontier, you wouldn't say something like that to save your own life. Male or female, young or old, it makes no difference. A kid's just as likely to be a killer as anyone else. How many people you think die at the hands of children every year?"

"But I'm telling you, that child's—"

"There's no way around this, old-timer," Jan interrupted. "From here on out, it's sure to be a hell of a trip. I don't care if he's just a kid; we can't bring anyone along that we've got any doubt about. What the warrior said is spot on. But there's something to what you're saying, too. Right now, there's the same chance any of us is the one

responsible. And with that in mind, I have a suggestion."

It must've been a really good idea, because the mobster was bursting with confidence.

"Let's try threatening the kid with a knife."

Jan whipped around in amazement to stare at Maria.

Downing the contents of her cup, the woman responsible for the remark continued, "That's what you were going to say, isn't it? It's not too hard to see what a guy like you is thinking. If the kid *is* to blame, you just might wind up getting us another taste of that fear. An insensitive clod like you might be able to take it, but how do you think those old folks would fare? Try using *this* for a change!"

The way she tapped the index finger of her free hand against her head made Jan's eyes widen.

"You trying to say I'm not very *smart*?"

"You trying to say you are?"

"You—you bitch!" the mobster said, making a tight fist as he started toward Maria.

Just then, a low gasp of surprise rang out. Actually, there were two of them, from the sheriff and the policeman. They were staring at the boy. And they'd seen that he'd finally looked up.

"Someone's coming," the boy said in a dazed tone. Compared to other children his age, his voice was low and feeble. However, the fear it carried was hair-raisingly real.

"Someone's coming," the boy said again, and then he stood up.

Oblivious to the fact that the eyes of all were focused on him, he started to walk out of the rocky area.

"Who's coming?" the policeman asked, blinking his eyes like mad.

"Is it *them*? The Playground's dismantlers? Or is it—an *overseer*?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" the sheriff shouted. "There's nothing like that out here. Those are just old wives' tales."

"How about *that*, then?" the warrior asked.

Halting about five yards from the group, the boy turned his face to the west. The warrior was behind him. Everyone but the suckling stood up and looked in the same direction.

The area to the west was hidden by a yellow cloud of dust—whirling sand. Out of it, a black shape began to come into view, nearly five hundred yards away. In the depths of that sandy cloud, it was hard to tell if it was man or beast. Yet everyone there knew. It was a human being. A man. And one of unearthly beauty, at that.

The figure first appeared as slim as a blade of grass. It soon took on a distinctly human form. The wide-brimmed traveler's hat and pitch-black coat he wore and the saddlebags and elegant longsword over his shoulder became visible, and finally he halted before the group, all in under ten minutes—and the whole time they simply

stood there, unable to move a muscle. As if their bones had been fused together by the unearthly aura the figure emanated—by his beauty.

Knocking the sand from his coat with his left hand, he said softly, "I'm D." His whole form seemed swathed in glowing darkness.

"As you can probably see from that skybus, we're stranded survivors," the sheriff said. As a representative of the group, he was probably just about the perfect age. "You know, we were just about to head east. I don't know whether to consider you lucky or not. I'm the sheriff from the Valkin area. Shrive's the name."

"I'm—Maria." Though she was looking up, the woman's gaze and voice were both vacant—but that couldn't be helped when dealing with this young man.

"I'm Jan—and, as you can see, I'm a drifter."

"I'm Franz Stow, and this is my wife, Bella," the elderly man said. The old woman stared at the young man in black with a look in her eyes that suggested she was dreaming.

D's eyes fixed on the boy, who hung his head low.

"What's your name?" D inquired.

This was a miraculous occurrence, and it caused another miracle to happen. Though still facing the ground, the boy began to move his lips. What they formed was clearly a word.

". . . Toto."

"I'll be damned!" Jan said, throwing his arms up in celebration. "I figured he didn't have a brain in his head, but he can talk and everything. Hell, I guess even another guy couldn't resist answering someone as good looking as you. Pretty ones and crying kids have all the luck in this world."

"That's a nice name," D said before looking at the strangest member of the group—the hooded figure.

"He's a suckling," the sheriff said disdainfully. There was probably no need to keep telling people that, but he did anyway. He didn't even know that he did so out of fear. "We're in the process of transferring him to a government research facility in the Capital. At any rate, he's shot full of drugs. Keeps him quiet."

"Don't give civilians more information than they need, sheriff," the policeman said, stopping him. "This guy has a strange air about him. He's no ordinary traveler. What are you, anyway? And what are you doing out here?"

"My horse has expired. As for my line of work—"

"He's a Vampire Hunter."

The world was robbed of every last sound. As they all stared at D, not even the wind whispered in their ears. At that moment, they all thought, *Yes, that's exactly what he is.*

D's eyes turned to the man who'd spoken.

"Vampire Hunter D, it's an honor to meet you. I'm—"

"Bierce the warrior—I've heard of you."

"Then that's an even greater honor," Bierce said, a grin surfacing on his bearded face and then vanishing.

The Vampire Hunter's meeting with the warrior ended there.

D casually turned to the policeman, who backed away.

"I—um, I'm Officer Weizmann, on prisoner-escort duty for the Ministry of Police."

"Get out of here quick," D said. He was facing east. His tone suggested he didn't have an iota of interest in anyone in the group. "The enemy will be here soon. Any talk of this place being safe is mistaken."

"Really?" the sheriff said, looking all around.

"Don't give us that crap. We don't see anything here," the squinting Weizmann protested, having circled around in front of the Hunter.

"Have it your way."

And leaving them with this remark, D started to walk off.

"Hold up—me and Maria are going with you!" Jan shouted, but D didn't stop.

"Just a minute. Don't go speaking for me," Maria said, her breath reeking of alcohol.

"Hey, I know what I'm talking about here. I've been doing what I do for ten years now. When things get hairy, I know who you can count on. And without a doubt, it's *that* guy. C'mon, kid. Come with us."

Toto didn't move. The beauty that had brought back the boy's humanity for a brief moment was now a good fifty yards ahead of them.

Jan had no problem cutting him loose.

"Okay, it's your funeral. Someone look after this kid. He's in your hands. Hey, anyone else coming?" he asked as he grabbed his simple travel case and got to his feet.

After careful deliberation, the elderly Franz rose. "We're going with you. Come along, dear," he said, taking his wife by the hand.

"Good idea," Bierce chimed in, hefting a battered duffel bag.

"Wait just a minute!" Weizmann cried, his face going pale. "We're the ones who'll keep you safe—not some mobster and a Hunter you don't know from a hole in the ground. Don't you get it? Splitting up out here is dangerous. How are we supposed to save you if—"

Apparently Sheriff Shrive had grown tired of listening to the young lawman's protestations, for in an effort to quiet him he told the man, "It's no use."

"But—"

"What are you gonna do? Stay here? I'll help you if you do."

"I thought you just said we should go."

As he stared with a look of disgust at the backs of those who hurried ahead, Weizmann stomped his feet in place and checked the fit of his shoes.

"Before we go, let's bury the pilot," the sheriff said, raining a little on the younger man's parade.

Before long, the three figures walked off in pursuit of the others, who were already out of sight, and as stillness choked the rocky spot, something bizarre transpired. Though no one was aware of it, the voices of men and women, as well as the wind and various other sounds, could be heard in the deserted wasteland. Sure enough, they were the voices of the survivors who'd been there a scant hour earlier talking to each other, and also the exact same sounds they'd made moving around—it was a complete reenactment of the past.

Then the sound of shoveling finished, a prayer chanted in the sheriff's voice faded, and Officer Weizmann's urged, "Okay, let's go." At the same time, another voice that the two lawmen hadn't heard also replayed. It was a deep, deep, mocking sort of tone of pure delight. One thing alone was for certain: the source of that voice wasn't human. No human being could laugh like that.

Shortly thereafter, three sets of footsteps echoed from the ground as they started off across the wasteland.

"They're following us, just like I thought, the lousy pests," said a hoarse voice. It came from the vicinity of D's left hip. There was nothing there but his left hand.

The voice continued its harangue, saying, "This is partly your fault, you know. You're the one who made that worthless bunch do it. You never should've told 'em it was dangerous out here. Talk about being completely out of luck. Those clowns think they were spared the hell of dying in a crash, and now they're jumping into a different kind of hell. It's a million times more dangerous out here."

D pressed ahead, not saying a word.

As evening approached, the wind twined around the cooling light so it might sneak its chill into the people even through their eyes. That alone would've made it hard enough for a living creature to survive until morning, but this was no ordinary wasteland.

Shortly after, the hoarse voice inquired, "You hear that?"

There was no reply. That was as good as an affirmation.

"Why, that's—a flute. My! Above us and below, to our left and right, I can hear it coming from every possible direction. There must be enough people playing to start a damn orchestra."

“There are only two,” D said simply.

“That can’t be!” the hoarse voice replied, and then it fell silent, adding a second later, “You’re right. You really are one scary character, you know that? Sure as hell, you’re the only one who could do a job like *this* out here in the Playground, where your horse got gobbled up as soon as we entered the place.”

“How far is the fortress?”

“Another fifty miles. We should get there tomorrow. Of course, the real trouble will just be starting then.” Chortling, the hoarse voice added, “Those clowns will be better off if they die along the way.”

The voice stopped.

D had halted. Even in the midday sun, his beautiful visage remained icy cold, and he kept it pointed straight ahead.

“The sound of their footsteps has disappeared,” the hoarse voice was heard to say.

The man’s black hair fluttered in the wind like the lush grass of the prairies.

“So, what are you gonna do? You planning on going to save ’em?”

Before the voice had finished teasing D, the Hunter’s boots began treading the ground before him again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku,* in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there are seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist, and is the famed designer for the Final Fantasy game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman, and for Marvel Comics on *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.